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LEARNING TO LEAD DISCUSSIONS: CONTEXT,
CONFLICT, AND COMMUNITY

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KEVIN GEORGE BASMADJIAN

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of the requirements for the

Ph. D. degree in Curriculum, Teaching, and
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**LEARNING TO LEAD DISCUSSIONS:
CONTEXT, CONFLICT, AND COMMUNITY**

VOLUME I

By

Kevin George Basmadjian

A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

By

Kevin George Basmadjian

This study examines how pre-service English teachers learned to lead discussions of literature in diverse, urban schools. The context was a semester-long English methods seminar in a highly regarded teacher education program, which candidates took in conjunction with their student teaching internship. Drawing on a socio-cultural view of learning, and in particular socio-historical activity theory, this study viewed the English teacher education program as an activity system. It aimed to look across the multiple settings of this activity system – including the seminar, the field placement classrooms, and conversations with mentor teachers – to understand where and how pre-service teachers developed ideas about leading discussions of literature. Data collection methods included videotaped observations of the English methods seminar, artifacts of teaching and learning in the field placement classrooms, and interviews with the eight pre-service English teachers.

Data analysis suggested that interns used and appropriated various tools across the numerous settings of the English methods activity system. Moreover, analysis revealed that through mediation with each other around these tools, interns were able to develop fairly sophisticated ways of thinking and talking about the teacher's role in leading discussions. Four tools seemed to play a particularly important role in shaping teacher learning. They were: interns' initial beliefs about discussions, videotaped discussions of literature, published artifacts and scholarship, and the seminar instructor's pedagogy. Evidence related to each of these tools are described and explained in the body of this

dissertation, along with several key themes and findings. The paper concludes with some practical and theoretical implications for teacher education, including the uses and limitations of activity theory as a conceptual framework for studying and understanding teacher learning.

**Dedicated to my grandfather, a beloved and passionate teacher,
whom I never had a chance to meet.**

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CHAPTER ONE

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

In my two years leading up to graduate school, I taught English at the most diverse public high school in the State of Michigan.¹ In my classroom, I encouraged students to ask more questions than they answered about texts, to never settle for just one truth. I wanted them to become critical and involved citizens and thinkers, and believed that discussions of literature created opportunities to develop these capacities. I sought to create what Bakhtin (1986) has called “dialogic” space, where “speakers and writers routinely appropriate the language of others to concur with another’s ideas to articulate and support their own claims” (Knoeller, 1998, p. 15).

I will never forget the day Michelle², an African-American student, took me to task. As we began a discussion of Twain’s (1986) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by reading in the author’s dialectical voice, she interrupted with a question about Jim, Miss Watson’s Negro slave. “Why he gotta talk like he dumb?” she asked. Despite my five years of teaching experience, I failed to recognize Michelle’s question as an opportunity to initiate and facilitate a meaningful discussion of literature with my students. Instead, I saw her question as potentially inflammatory, and one that threatened the sanctity of my instructional objectives. *If we take time to discuss her question, I thought to myself, there’s no telling where the discussion might go, or how far we’ll stray*

¹ During a public speech on the grounds of our school, the Henry Ford Academy, former Governor John Engler characterized our school as “the most diverse in the state of Michigan” in terms of students’ ethnicity, cultural and linguistic background, and socio-economic status.

² All names of persons and schools in this proposal are pseudonyms.

from my instructional objectives. Moreover, given the rich diversity of my students, coupled with the fact that many were interacting with students from different racial and cultural backgrounds for the first time in their schooling, I worried that students might say the “wrong things” to each other.

In the years that have followed that moment, I have reflected on what it means for English teachers to plan and lead discussions of literature in diverse classrooms. Despite hours of preparation for the *Huck* lesson, I had not anticipated Michelle’s question. Moreover, I was not sure how to respond given the rich social, cultural, and linguistic diversity of my students. Nystrand and his colleagues (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997) suggest Michelle’s question was an “authentic” one; they argue that such questions are essential to meaningful, engaging discussions. Authentic questions are those without prescribed answers that “invite students to contribute something new to the discussion” (Nystrand et al, 1997). Michelle’s question met both criteria. In addition to deepening textual and historical understanding of the novel, her question held potential to contribute something new. It held potential to stretch the political and socio-cultural boundaries of our classroom, to empower students and speak to issues of social justice, and to teach us about our selves and about each other. And yet, as a novice teacher with specific objectives in mind for my lesson, I opted for the easy way out. I explained to Michelle and her classmates that Jim talked the way he did because he was a slave and therefore had no access to formal education. She reluctantly accepted my response, and we plodded toward my instructional objectives.

In some way or another, most of my graduate work and interests have stemmed from that moment in my teaching practice. Michelle's question forced me to analyze and reflect upon the inherent complexities and uncertainties associated with what Nystrand and Gamoran (1991), among others, call *dialogic instruction*. I was particularly interested in how these issues play out in urban schools, where socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic student diversity is typically the norm. As a graduate student, I taught and worked with numerous pre-service teachers who, like me, wanted to teach in diverse, urban schools. Many wanted to become agents of change for their students, and to create dialogic space and lead discussions that would not only enhance textual understanding, but also empower students, foster appreciation of diversity, and contribute in some way to social justice and understanding. This work led me to wonder where and how beginning teachers learn to negotiate the tension and uncertainty associated with dialogic instruction, the impact of teacher education on learning to lead discussions of literature, and the opportunities and experiences that might best prepare novice teachers to create and cultivate dialogic classrooms in culturally diverse urban schools.

Description of the Problem

Maggie Lampert (1985) writes, "The work of managing (classroom) dilemmas . . . requires admitting some essential limitations on our control over human problems. It suggests that some conflicts cannot be resolved and that the challenge is to find ways to keep them from erupting into more disruptive confrontations" (p. 193). But as Bakhtin (1981) writes, dialogic instruction is replete with, even *depends upon*, conflict and tension. So how are we to reconcile these seemingly contradictory perspectives? What

does this mean for interpretive discussions of literature which, by their very nature, are dialogic and therefore full of tension and contradiction? Should teachers – particularly beginners – circumvent interpretive discussions of literature in order to avoid “disruptive confrontations,” or embrace them as powerful sites for learning and engagement?

Research suggests that interpretive discussions of literature can create powerful opportunities for student growth, achievement, and understanding, particularly when teachers surrender curricular and instructional control to their students (e.g., Christoph & Nystand, 2001; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997). However, my work with secondary English interns, coupled with my understanding of the research literature (e.g., Agee, 1998; Grossman, 1989; Marshall & Smith, 1997; Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1998), suggests that surrendering control to students in order to create dialogic space can be a difficult and daunting task for beginning teachers.

These challenges are amplified for pre-service teachers placed in unfamiliar school settings, charged with teaching students who differ from themselves in terms of race, ethnicity, linguistic background, or socio-economic class (Grant & Secada, 1990; Hartounian-Gordon, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Paley, 1979). Leslie, a pre-service English teacher with whom I worked over a two-year period, described some of the challenges she faced in leading interpretive discussions of literature in an urban³, eighth-grade classroom. She explained, “[As far as] the experiences that are close to me, (my students) don’t have any idea. And the stuff they know, I’m like, wow, I don’t get that . . . I was sort of intimidated at first because I was like, I’m not gonna know half of what they’re saying.” In other words, besides beginning teachers’ typical concerns about

³ The district in which she worked self-identified themselves as an “urban” school district on their website.

content knowledge, Leslie worried that she and her students would not be able to understand each other during discussions. She added:

They want to play when they talk . . . it's a different one-upmanship here. Who can make the funnier crack? Who can build on the next person's remark and turn it around? That kind of thing, which is hard because it's a lot of turning around, changing the topic, moving on . . . the students are not going to answer your question directly. They are going to answer a little tilted, and part of that's a game (Field notes, Sept. 2001).

In many ways, the “game” that Leslie describes is at the center of Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogism. Bakhtin asserts that language is never entirely original, but a blend of past and present meanings which individuals in conversation borrow and appropriate over time. In the example above, Leslie's students are cognizant of the fact that they are using each other's language and ideas. For Bakhtin, dialogism is an imperceptible communication process that occurs not only between speakers but also between and among readers and texts. In these relationships, meaning is made as conflict and tension are negotiated between the understandings of individuals employing them. Thus, as teachers and students communicate with themselves and each other, they enter into this tension-filled interaction along with both present and past speakers. In this sense, the creation of dialogic space is a complicated process, particularly for beginning or pre-service teachers.

My work with Leslie and others led me to realize that creating dialogic space with students from diverse cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds was challenging work

for teachers. Christoph and Nystrand (2001) made similar observations in their study of a 15-year veteran teacher's efforts toward dialogic instruction. Add to this the often difficult charge of assessing what students learn and understand through discussions of literature and one starts to understand why so many teachers, novice as well as experienced, feel compelled to dominate conversation in order to control the direction of discussions of literature (Marshall, Smith & Smagorinsky, 1995).

These challenges, combined with the growing need for teachers in increasingly diverse classrooms (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996, 1997), implore us to understand more about what and how pre-service teachers learn to lead discussions of literature in formal teacher education programs. Empirical research that investigates the connections between pedagogies of English methods courses and the knowledge and practices of novice teachers is scarce, particularly when investigating dialogic forms of instruction.

Research Questions

For the reasons mentioned above, and because I hoped to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between English methods courses and the knowledge and practices of beginning teachers, I began my study with the following research questions: How do pre-service English teachers learn to create and cultivate dialogic space during discussions of literature with, culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse students in urban schools?

Subsumed within this question were several others I hoped to explore, all of which sought to investigate teacher learning in the context of a formal teacher education

program. Those questions included: 1) How, if at all, do the curricular experiences of a secondary English education program prepare pre-service teachers to create and cultivate dialogic space during discussions of literature? 2) How, if at all, do pre-service English teachers' field placement experiences, as student-teachers, shape and inform the ways in which they create and cultivate dialogic space during discussions of literature? 3) How, if at all, do pre-service teachers' beliefs about interpretive discussions of literature inform, complement, and/or conflict with what they learn in their secondary English methods program? 4) How, if at all, do interns' experiences in diverse, urban schools shape and inform their beliefs about students and/or their ability/capacity to create and cultivate dialogic space during discussions of literature? 5) What challenges, if any, do pre-service English teachers face in learning to create and cultivate dialogic space during discussions of literature in diverse, urban classrooms?

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I review two strands of research in order to uncover the assumptions and challenges associated with learning to create and cultivate dialogic space during discussions of literature. The first review offers a brief history of teaching literature through discussions, along with current and/or influential research that identifies the benefits and limitations of discussions of literature, and the nature of classroom talk. The second review addresses the unsettled yet widely researched terrain of teacher learning, knowledge, and beliefs. Through this review I hope to address the complexities and uncertainties associated with learning to teach in diverse settings, with an emphasis on teacher learning across multiple activity settings. And finally, after

reviewing these two distinct bodies of literature, I turn to a discussion of socio-historical activity theory, or activity theory, the theoretical framework for my study.

Discussions of Literature and the Nature of Classroom Talk

Features of an Interpretive Discussion

In her study of two teachers' efforts to lead literature-based discussions in two distinctly different high school classrooms, Hartounian-Gordon (1991) describes what active, whole-class interpretive discussions of literature might look like. She writes:

Picture a classroom in which . . . chairs are arranged in a circle. The teacher, like the students, sits in one of the chairs, and each person in the group holds a copy of *Romeo and Juliet*. The students have been assigned to read Act II, scene iv (or perhaps they have just finished reading it aloud), and the teacher asks, "Why does the nurse decide to help Romeo and Juliet to marry, even though the woman knows it may bring them harm?" The question can be answered in several ways, given what Shakespeare tells us. As a consequence, the teacher lacks certainty about the resolution of the question. Her aim in asking it is to explore students' thoughts about the answer and in so doing draw out their ideas about the meaning of the play. As people speak, she and the others question them about their beliefs. Interpretations of particular passages emerge, only to evolve as new ideas about them enter the conversation. The question with which the group began may be modified or give way to another. The teacher summarizes ideas from time to time, but she is not pushing the group to reach consensus. Consensus may emerge, however (p. 4).

Hartounian-Gordon's portrayal of an interpretive discussion of literature is useful because it provides an example and highlights the features of dialogic instruction. Through numerous studies of secondary English classroom instruction, Nystrand and his colleagues (e.g., Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Nystrand et al, 1997) identified three characteristics of dialogic space during discussions of literature. They are: authentic questions, uptake, and high-level evaluations which validate students' responses.

Christoph and Nystrand (2001) define *authentic questions* as questions "which value and elicit student ideas and not just mastery of information" (p. 251). Authentic questions are presented by students as well as teachers, and have no correct or pre-determined answers.⁴ They often require self-corrections and repairs (i.e., "I mean"), and often attempt to mitigate the distance between teacher and students by prefacing with phrases such as, "I'm gonna ask you about something," or "Lemme just ask you." Moreover, the researchers point out, authentic questions encourage individual interpretations and invite students to participate in the processes of examination, elaboration, and revision.

Nystrand et al. (1997) define *uptake* as occasions when the teacher or a student asks "follow-up questions (intended) to pursue points and lines of inquiry introduced by (other) students" (p. 39). For example, a student in a class might introduce a new perspective or interpretation into a class discussion. The other students, or the teacher,

⁴ However, as Nystrand et al. (1997) point out, questions with "correct" answers can also be considered authentic if the person asking the question does not honestly know the answer. For example, the question, "Who won the World Series in 1928?" is authentic as the person asking does not know the answer. To address this discrepancy, the researcher write that the "genre of classroom discourse . . . is the most reliable indicator of authenticity" (p. 39). In other words, the authenticity of a question depends upon who is asking and for what purpose he/she is asking.

might then ask that student a follow-up question, to clarify, redirect, or perhaps extend the student's initial thought or idea. Nystrand et al. (1997) write, "Teachers use uptake whenever they follow up on student responses" (p. 39). They also point out that uptake plays an essential role in dialogic instruction as students and teacher "listen and respond appropriately to each other" (p. 39).

Finally, *high-level questions* or *evaluations* are those which "valorize students' responses and allow their ideas to influence the direction of classroom discourse" (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001, p. 251). In discussions of literature, all responses are equally honored and valued; one response is not seen as more important or more "correct" than the others. Nystrand et al. (1997) identify four factors they used to code the cognitive level of questions: the source of the question, a students' experience and prior knowledge, the nature of the instructional activity, and the source of information required by the question.

These three qualities – authentic questions, uptake, and high-level questions or evaluations – signify the presence and constitute the essence of dialogic instruction. But given the apparent complexities and uncertainties associated with leading interpretive discussions of literature (which I more fully develop later in this proposal), one might ask why we should even care about them. What role do interpretive discussions of literature serve in the secondary English language arts classroom? Why should (or might) progressive English teacher education programs promote dialogic instruction in their methods courses? In the following section, I address the purposes of creating and cultivating dialogic space during discussions of literature.

Dialogic Instruction and Discussions of Literature

Although the word “dialogic” does not explicitly appear in commonly referenced expressions of standards for English language arts (e.g., NCTE standards, 1996; Michigan Curriculum Framework standards, 1996), its features are embedded in numerous benchmarks and performance indicators. For example, NCTE/IRA Standard #3 states that students should, “Draw on their prior experience (and) their interactions with other readers and writers . . . to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts” (NCTE, 1996). One of the eight high school benchmarks for Content Standard #3 of the Michigan Curriculum Framework states that students should, “Read and write fluently, speak confidently, listen and interact appropriately, view critically, and represent creatively” (Michigan Curriculum Framework, 1996, p. 10). In the same document, a benchmark for Content Standard #10 indicates that students should, “Function as literature individuals in varied contexts within their lives and beyond the classroom” (p. 19). Implicit in each of these examples is the expectation that students engage with each other in authentic ways, and for authentic purposes.

Standards for teaching English language arts reflect similar dialogic means and purposes without necessarily using “dialogic” terminology. For example, NCATE’s Program Standards for the Initial Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts (1997) states that teachers should, “Demonstrate a respect for the worth and contributions of all learners”(Standard 2.1, p. 7), “Organize classroom environments and learning experiences that promote effective whole class, small group, and individual work” (Standard 4.3, p. 11), and “Engage students in making meaning of texts through personal response” (Standard 4.10, p. 12). Individually and collectively, these standards encourage

the creation and cultivation of an active and engaging learning community, where students are interacting with each other around authentic and meaningful tasks.

The Middletown University (MU) Teacher Education (TE) program emphasizes similar dialogic goals and expectations for its interns. For example, the program expects interns to “Implement a curriculum of understanding,” “Respect and care for all students,” “Promote active learning and thoughtfulness,” “Build on students’ strengths, interests, and cultural backgrounds,” and “Create a safe, caring, and productive environment in the classroom” (MU TE Professional Teaching Standards, 2001). One team offers examples of what these standards might look like in the classroom: “The intern combines questions, tasks, materials, and participation structures that will engage students, stimulate and support their thinking, organize their in-depth exploration of topics, and otherwise promote genuine understanding,” “The intern leads class discussions that explore problems and ideas, that elicit diverse responses from many students, and that get students to think critically,” and “The intern adapts her/his own role to the activity that s/he is trying to produce among students, e.g., tries to figure out when to talk and when to listen in a class discussion” (Team 4 Professional Teaching Standards, 2001).

Combined, the standards created by these three groups (NCTE, Michigan Curriculum Framework, MU TE program) suggest that creating and sustaining dialogic space is an important instructional goal, particularly during discussions of literature. Of course, this does not mean that all good instruction is dialogic. As Nystrand and Gamoran (1991; 1997) point out, “monologic” classrooms are equally important and can be equally interactive. They draw on Heath’s (1978) distinction between *procedural display* and

substantive engagement to understand interactions between and among the teacher and students. Procedural displays are marked by interactions between the teacher and students that focus on logistical, procedural issues. Participation in discussions, for example, generally follows scripted patterns of questions and answers, much like what researchers have called *recitation* (see, for example, Durkin, 1979). Substantive engagement, by contrast, is signified by meaningful, authentic exchanges between the teacher and students, and can occur in monologic as well as dialogic classrooms. I make this distinction to emphasize the point that not all discussions are educative, just as all teacher-centered lessons are not unproductive.

A more productive distinction to make in terms of effective instruction may be the contrast between discussion and recitation. Tharp and Gallimore (1988) define recitation as, “a series of unrelated teacher questions that require convergent factual answers and student display of (presumably) known information” (p. 14). In other words, recitation is composed primarily of “yes” and “no” questions that seek correct answers and are not intended to be generative or “responsive to student productions” (p. 14). Implicit in this type of exchange is an authoritarian view of knowledge, where the teacher determines what is to be discussed or learned and how. Applebee (1974; 1993) points out that from the start, some form of recitation has dominated discussions of literary texts in schools, characterized by the sequential pattern of *interaction* (I), usually in the form of a teacher’s question; *response* (R), where a student responds to the question; and *evaluation* (E), where the teacher evaluates or gives feedback on the student’s response (Cazden, 1988; 2001; Mehan, 1979; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

Despite emerging consensus about the relationship between learning and classroom discourse, literature instruction has generally been organized around this I-R-E sequence. The “transmission” of ideas has been considered paramount, with few opportunities for students to interact with each other (Cazden, 2001; Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995; Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur, & Prendergast, 1997). English lessons tend to be combination of seatwork and teacher-led discussions that aim to bring students to collective and acceptable interpretations of literature (Applebee, 1993). Nystrand (1997) has described the teaching of literature in secondary English classrooms as “overwhelmingly monologic”, reporting that teachers lectured or led discussions that were marked by two-way interactions, mostly question and answer, between teachers and students.

While the I-R-E sequence has largely governed interactions between teachers and students, two traditions have dominated the content of discussions of literature. The first is the interpretive stance, characterized by a search for the “correct interpretation” of a text. The authority for meaning making lies within the text, according to this stance, and readers’ experiences are regarded as irrelevant and unimportant. In general, classroom talk that is organized around the interpretive stance involves interactions where “teachers teach and students ‘student’” (Purves, Rogers & Soter, 1995, p. 89); teachers guide students toward specific interpretations, and students contribute by responding to teachers’ questions.

In contrast to this approach to literature discussions is an emphasis on the “transaction” between readers and texts (Rosenblatt, 1995). Teachers who adopt a transactional view of literature encourage students to use their own experiences to make

sense of the literature. Classroom talk is marked less by students' responses to teachers' questions, and more by open and boundless dialogue between and among teachers and students. In this case, the authority for meaning making lies with the reader, and knowledge is co-constructed among the students. As Applebee (1996) and others (for example, Appleman, 2000; Friere, 1970; Marshall, Smagorinsky & Smith, 1995) have argued, the various approaches to literature discussions reflect contrasting beliefs about the nature of knowledge and power in learning.

Regardless of the approach to the study of literature, dialogic instruction holds potential to extend and deepen students' understanding of text. Dialogically-organized discussions of literature, in particular, create opportunities for students to learn by doing (Barnes, 1976; Marshall et al, 1995; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; 1997; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Dewey (1916) was among the first to characterize the relationship between what we do and how we think and learn, writing:

To learn by doing is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes the instruction – discovery of the connection of things (p. 140)

Dewey believed we learn by exploring and experimenting with ideas, answers, truths, and questions. We learn when we are able to discover things for ourselves in authentic contexts. Dialogically-organized interpretive discussions, as characterized above, promote and provide such contexts. Moreover, experimentation and discovery are

manifest through students' interpretations of author and character intentions, story predictions, and connections to broader social themes and issues. Learning, in this sense, is situative; it happens through interactions with others in social situations, and the discursive practices in which learners participate both constrain and afford what they come to know (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Smagorinsky & Lee, 2000). But how do we know that students learn or understand through interpretive discussions of literature? What research, if any, can point to concrete, empirical evidence in support of a relationship between understanding, achievement, and dialogically-organized interpretive discussions of literature? While most research has focused on the discursive and affective qualities of discussions, studies conducted by Nystrand and his colleagues (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Nystrand et al, 1997) suggest that discussions of literature benefit student learning and achievement.

In one study (Nystrand et al, 1997), secondary students were given an examination that included short answer and multiple-choice questions related to literature they had discussed during the year. Questions asked students to describe characters, identify elements of plot, and explain themes. The researchers looked for correlations between test scores and methods of instruction in their English classrooms. What they found is that substantive engagement, which included discussions of literature, had a strong positive effect on student achievement for eighth grade students. Interestingly, for ninth graders, the opposite was true; discussion appeared to have a negative effect on student learning and achievement. Upon closer examination of the data, they realized that teachers used authentic questions differently in high and low track classes, and that more ninth grade students had been placed in low-track classrooms. This data not only suggests

that authentic, open-ended questions ultimately lead to higher achievement, but also supports the widespread belief among researchers that teachers hold lower expectations for lower track students. As McLaughlin & Talbert (1993) and Winfield (1986) have argued, lower expectations often lead teachers to “water down” curriculum for students they perceive to be less capable, which only perpetuates the achievement gap in schools and classrooms.

In one of the most comprehensive studies of whole-class discussions of literature, Marshall et al (1995) reported similar observations regarding teachers’ perceptions and expectations of lower track students. The researchers studied teachers’ and students’ perspectives on the purposes and methods of high school literature discussions and found that overall, regardless of ability level, teachers maintained tight control over the topics, questions, and interpretations explored in class. This was particularly striking given these same teachers’ expressed desire to surrender facilitation and leadership of whole-class discussions to their students. But perhaps more striking was their finding that teachers’ ideas about the purposes of discussion and their roles in achieving those purposes varied according to the ways they perceived the abilities of the students tracked into their classrooms.

Teachers of high-ability classes emphasized the active participation of students as they moved “into a higher level application of the piece of literature to their own lives or to a deeper understanding of the piece” (p. 19). These teachers hoped that students would move away from “questions and answers” that revolved around the summaries of texts, and move toward careful analysis and application of the text to their own lives. Somewhat paradoxically, they simultaneously believed that they should facilitate

opportunities for students to take charge of interpreting texts, while they also wanted to make sure that the discussions resulted in students being able to reach specific understandings. Teachers of mid-level ability students echoed this tension between the dual objectives they held for classroom discussions.

By contrast, teachers who worked with students tracked into low-ability classes were the “most consistent in stating their hope that students would engage with literature on a personal level” (p. 26). These teachers focused less on directing students toward specific interpretations of texts, and more on using texts to help students understand themselves. This objective was difficult to reach, however, as teachers found that students were unfamiliar with discursive practices involved in discussions where they had to agree and disagree with each other while engaging in exploratory talk. Instead, students sought “fill in the blank answers” (p. 29) to discussion questions and did not seek opportunities to press for deeper interpretations. Marshall speculated that these students may not have had the opportunity to participate in *speech genres* (Bakhtin, 1986) that would prepare them for high-level dialogic interactions, and that students tracked into low-level classes are accustomed to the recitation script.

This speculation is supported by research conducted by Wollman-Bonilla (1994), and Miller & Legge (1999), and Hartounian-Gordon (1991). Wollman-Bonilla studied two sixth grade discussion groups, one she characterizes as “low ability,” the other as “high ability.” Although she wanted both groups to engage in informal discussions of literature, only the “high ability” readers constructed a conversation in which students participated eagerly and valued others’ contributions. The other group members were reluctant to contribute, looked to the teacher to lead discussions, and did not work

collaboratively with each other. However, as the teacher scaffolded instruction – for example, by initially asking directed questions about specific textual passages – he began to develop an atmosphere of inquiry. The researcher observed a dramatic change, leading her to conclude, “Teachers cannot assume that students will know what is intended when they ask students to ‘just speak’ about texts. Nor will all students be comfortable with this role. But if teachers provide explicit instruction, they may be able to support students in learning new ways of interacting that may create greater opportunities for learning” (p. 255).

Miller & Legge (1999) reported similar findings in their study of a high school English teacher’s efforts to engage “at-risk” students in discussions of literature. The turning point for the class came when the teacher opened herself up to her students, shared personal experiences and interpretations to demonstrate what it meant to engage in a discussion of literature. The researchers conclude that merely “inviting student response into the classroom (is) not enough.” Rather, teachers must demonstrate an interest in and connection to the literature themselves, and the intellectual lives of their students. They write, “In sharing her own connectedness to others through common interest in literature, (the teacher) seemed to validate, and perhaps even reveal, for students the human inclination toward a social, story-seeking consciousness. The out-of-school texts brought into school by students became part of the inter-textual resources of the class but also, part of creating the conversational community beyond their single class” (p. 48).

Finally, Hartounian-Gordon (1991) co-taught and researched her practice of leading interpretive discussions in two distinctly different classrooms – one in a private, racially integrated school in suburban Chicago, the other in a public school located in

Chicago's black ghetto. She found that although students in the public school (Beldon) had less experience participating in interpretive discussions of literature than Chalmers (private school) students, the teacher was able to scaffold her instruction in ways that allowed her students to pursue different avenues pertaining to character motivation in *Romeo and Juliet*, often drawing on personal experiences in similar situations. She writes:

What we saw was that over time, the students in both classrooms seemed to become able to talk about the play in a meaningful way, to make sense of the events and the characters' actions by bringing their own experiences and ideas to bear upon them. For the Beldon students, this involved learning to explore the text by relating its events to questions the leaders posed, raising questions themselves, analyzing passages, and bringing relevant personal views to bear upon the analysis . . . The Chalmers students, however, who had much less difficulty making textual interpretations, showed signs of learning something quite different, namely, to play the game of interpretive discussion for genuine rather than academic gain (p. 175).

Thus, in both schools, interpretive discussions of literature enhanced student learning. With their teacher's guidance, Beldon students developed more nuanced ways to explore and interpret what they read. They learned to think more analytically about the text and to bring personal experiences to bear upon this analysis. Chalmers students, who had much more experience participating in interpretive discussions, came to more fully and genuinely appreciate opportunities to talk about literature. They learned to more fully

appreciate the diversity of perspectives of their classmates, and to enjoy talking about literature for its own sake, and not because it was required of them in class.

Taken together, the above studies suggest that teachers who lead dialogically-organized interpretive discussions of literature help students develop skills and capacities that can promote learning and achievement. Although there is not conclusive or sufficiently strong empirical evidence to indicate a significant correlation between these variables, the studies do intimate a relationship. On the other hand, the studies also suggest that English teachers who create this space must carefully monitor the relationship between their goals and purposes for interpretive discussions of literature, their practice of leading discussions, and their beliefs about students of varying ability levels. Failure to examine this relationship may lead to increased disparity between “high” and “low” ability students.

Embedded in these and other studies are additional claims about the importance and benefits of dialogic instruction. These include the potential to create and nurture a supportive learning community (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Hartounian-Gordon, 1991; Wilhelm, 1995); to motivate reluctant students to read (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Langer, 1992, 1995; Nystrand et al, 1997; Wilhelm, 1995); to critically address issues of social justice, both locally and more broadly (Appleman, 2000; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Freire, 1970; Knoeller, 1998); to redistribute authority and thereby empower students to become critical and involved thinkers and citizens (Gutierrez & Larson, 1995; Hamel & Smith, 1998; Knoeller, 1998); to create new kinds of space for students to participate (Gutierrez & Larson, 1995; Moje, 2000; Newell, Gingrich & Johnson, 2001); and to inspire confidence in students (Irvine, 1994).

Given the apparent benefits, one might ask why dialogic instruction is not more common in high school English classrooms. One response, which I later address, is the challenge of learning how to create and cultivate this space. A second, which I consider in the following paragraphs, are the limitations of discussions of literature. In what follows, I address four limitations that are especially relevant to culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse urban classrooms.

Limitations of Dialogic Instruction in Diverse Urban Classrooms

When Fecho (2000) introduced the question, “How does learning about language connect you to your world?” to his culturally and linguistically diverse high school seniors, he anticipated the anxiety and tension that followed. He introduced the question in response to one student’s criticism of another’s presentation, saying that the presenter should have “switched to” standard English for the presentation. Several other students, including Cria, took exception. She asked, “Why shouldn’t she be allowed to speak Black English?” Fecho writes:

Seemingly prodded by this query, the class discussion spiraled out from there. We engaged a variety of issues, among them the nature of the relationship between language and the mainstream power structure, what acceptance of mainstream codes meant for speakers whose language and culture differed from that of the mainstream, the roles of English teachers and students of language, and what it means to study the mainstream codes while celebrating the home codes (p. 369).

This discussion prompted Fecho, a white teacher, to develop and research an inquiry-based project intended to raise questions about the impact that language and language learning had on students' lives. He asked students to respond to the question above by drawing on personal experience and on a diverse range of multi-cultural literature including Wilson's *Fences* (1986), Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* (1957), Kincaid's "Girl" (1993), and Wright's *Black Boy* (1945). From this study, Fecho realized (or was reminded of) two things. First, diversity of opinion should not only be tolerated but encouraged, "as long as those opinions are born of extensive attempts to gather a diversity of evidence upon which to base them" (p. 390). Second, he realized the difficulty of traversing terrain that deals substantively with issues related to race and class. He writes, "Day to day and class to class, I held my breath worrying what might be unearthed and how we might handle it" (p. 391).

Although Fecho's study and concerns pertain to whole-class discussions of language, the parallels to dialogically-organized discussions of literature are apparent. The example from my own teaching that opens this proposal provides one such example. Michelle asked a question that I feared might make students feel threatened or exposed, so I offered what I considered a relatively genteel response. But as Fecho writes in a later piece (2001) that focuses on his teaching of a contentious issue in his students' community between Jews and Blacks, "crossing boundaries of cultures is necessary, risk, and threatening" (p. 31). This is particularly the case for culturally, linguistically, or socio-economically diverse classrooms. He writes:

In efforts to reify middle-class values, discourses, and attitudes, schools tend to tolerate some feelings of threat to the exclusion of others. For example, far too

many schools prefer not to raise significant questions about race because they make many White stakeholders feel threatened. However, by not raising those questions, educators daily cause many children of color to feel threatened by the silence. Why is the latter tolerable although the former is not? (p. 31).

In other words, whether English teachers like it or not, threat is an inherent feature of dialogic instruction with students from diverse backgrounds, as well as for those from similar backgrounds. As Fecho (2001) reminds us, diversity of experience or perspective extends beyond skin color. He writes, “Too often observers of my classroom assumed homogeneity of opinion based solely on the homogeneity of the skin color of my student population” (p. 386). His reminder calls to mind the relationship between dialect and idiolect, as described in the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s *Students Right to their Own Language* (Parks, 2000). Parks, citing the document, writes, “A dialect is a variety of a language used by some definable group. Everyone has a personal version of language, an idiolect, which is unique, and closely related groups of idiolects make up dialects” (p. 258). When we conceive of our students and classrooms in these ways, it becomes apparent that no English teacher, regardless of years of experience, could anticipate when or for what reasons students might feel threatened.

It is for these reasons that I characterize threat as a potential limitation of dialogic instruction. If threat is not openly acknowledged, it can isolate or marginalize students, or lead them to repress ideas or emotions. On the other hand, if it is carelessly addressed or handled, it can lead to contentious, potentially volatile classroom situations. Ultimately, perhaps the only response to this limitation is Dewey’s (1938/1963) assertion that the role

of teachers is to bring their greater maturity and experience to the classroom in order to help students interrogate their beliefs. From this perspective, we begin to understand some of the challenges beginning teachers face in creating and cultivating dialogic space in their classrooms.

A second potential limitation of dialogic instruction is its capacity to encourage and invite all students to participate. This limitation extends beyond issues raised earlier concerning “low” or “high” ability readers, and relates to issues of inclusion based on race, class, gender, and/or discourse. From a socio-cultural perspective, school discourse privileges white, middle class students (Delpit, 1996, 2002; Gee, 1999). Heath (1983) demonstrates this in her seminal study of students from two distinctly different discourse communities. She concludes that teachers’ discursive practices often contrast with those of students from non-white or working class families and backgrounds. Thus, whether dialogic instruction can provide space for multiple and competing ways of participating – talking, listening, interacting – is not entirely clear. Florio-Ruane (2001) argues that students who come from cultural backgrounds that contrast with the teacher’s (typically, white, female, and middle class) are severely disadvantaged. She adds:

Lack of cultural understanding reinforces European-American teachers’ sense of “us” as normal (mainstream, white, or colorless) and “them” as abnormal (minority, of color, non-native speaking). Yet implicitly, the unmarked form is defined in its relationship to the marked form. To be “not anything” is to deny that we are enmeshed in systems in which oppositions are used to define self and other” (p. 25).

Florio-Ruane's admonition is especially germane for urban classrooms, where increasing numbers of European-American teachers who grew up in the suburbs or small towns teach students from diverse backgrounds (Florio-Ruane, 2001). Ultimately, for our purposes, it comes down to the question of whether it is possible to lead dialogically-organized discussions of literature that do not privilege one way of knowing and teaching and learning at the expense of others. Florio-Ruane, among others (e.g., Britzman, 1986; Delpit, 1995), believe it is possible, but only when teachers engage in critical self-reflection of their practice. But questions related to race, class, culture and discourse extend well beyond what teachers can or cannot do in the classroom. As numerous studies suggest, additional issues related to gender, race, sexual orientation, and physical or mental handicap further complicate teachers' efforts toward dialogic instruction.

With regard to race, for example, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) seek to understand why black students, as a whole, do not perform as well in school as white students. Through their ethnographic study of students from a high school in Washington, D.C., they conclude that "*one major reason* black students do poorly in school is (because) they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic effort and success" (p. 177, italics in original). In other words, because success in school is often regarded and appropriated by teachers and students as "white" behavior, black students often choose failing over "acting white." But what does this suggest for dialogic instruction in racially diverse classrooms? Given the very public nature of discussions, at least one very real possibility is complete withdrawal and resistance from black students, and any others who oppose the burden of "acting white."

Other studies examine how gender or sexual orientation might inhibit student participation in discussions. In her study of the relationship between gender and self-esteem in schools, Orenstein (1994) talks about girls' reluctance to participate in classroom discussions:

Girls' hesitance to speak out relative to boys is not mere stylistic difference; speaking out in class – and being acknowledged for it – is a constant reinforcement of a student's right to be heard, to take academic risks. Students who talk in class have more opportunity to enhance self-esteem through exposure to praise; they have the luxury of learning from mistakes and they develop the perspective to see failure as an educational tool (p. 12).

Orenstein's work suggests that gender not only plays a role in interpretive discussions, but that over time young women will participate less and less. Her findings raise serious concerns about whether or not dialogically-organized discussions of literature can actually be a pedagogy that encourages all students to engage and participate.

Two additional potential limitations of dialogic instruction during discussions of literature are worth noting, if only briefly. The first concerns text selection, and pertains to asks questions such as: How are these texts selected? On what criteria do teachers select these texts? Will some students respond more or less passionately to some texts than to others? Will some students respond more favorably to certain texts than other students? Smagorinsky (1992) poses similar questions in his discussion of the ethical problems associated with teaching literature to diverse students. While he acknowledges

there is no easy answer to these questions, he ultimately advises teachers to adopt “a greater sensitivity in (their) teaching that reflects (their) recognition that the experiences of some of (their) students may not be a dispassionate reading” (p. 226). But even in the best of all possible cases, reading a common text delimits the number of students who will be able to connect with a given text.

The second limitation is time. As Dillon (1994) has argued, discussion, relative to other forms of instruction, takes considerable time. This is often especially true for dialogically-organized discussions of complex or difficult literature, where students build on each others’ ideas and interpretations and gradually move toward individual and collective understanding. Further, as Dillon notes, discussions are often unpredictable when it comes to traditional forms of content coverage – in other words, making sure students know things. In the current push for more standardized tests in the name of increased teacher accountability, particularly in failing, urban schools, this unpredictability can become problematic (Lin, 2000; NRC, 1999). As McNeil (2000) demonstrates, teachers in under-achieving schools revert to more didactic ways of teaching (i.e., lecture, recitation) when they feel pressure to make sure their students perform well on state-mandated standardized tests. Under these conditions, discussions may be viewed as superfluous, time-consuming, and unnecessary.

So, where does all of this leave us with respect to discussions of literature? It likely leaves English teachers and teacher educators with some uncertainties about the potential for dialogically-organized discussions of literature to be educative⁵ for all students, in all conditions and settings. On the other hand, when dialogic discussions are led by thoughtful, reflective English teachers, they hold potential to empower students

⁵ Dewey described an “educative experience” as one that . . . *Experience and education* . . .

with the knowledge and capacity to become critical and involved citizens and thinkers. Such transformative potential should inspire us to understand more about what is involved in preparing quality English teachers to create and cultivate dialogic space in their classrooms, particularly when leading discussions of literature. In the section that follows, I describe and explain the challenges associated with learning to teach English, with a particular emphasis on learning to lead dialogically-organized discussions of literature.

Learning to Lead Discussions of Literature

In the context of curriculum reform that focuses on discourse as a teaching tool (Michigan Curriculum Framework, 1998; National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), research has increasingly characterized teaching as a complex practice (for example, Ball & Cohen, 1999; Darling-Hammond, Wise & Klein, 1999; Lampert, 1985; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996, 1997; Shulman, 1987). For example, in a study of her own teaching practice, Lampert (2001) illustrates the subtle complexities and challenges associated with leading a discussion with her fifth grade students. She shows that teacher knowledge is highly contextualized and involves deep understanding of children, content, pedagogy, and schools. Similarly, Christoph & Nystrand (2001) demonstrate that leading dialogic discussions of literature require deep knowledge of students – both in school as well as outside of school – that is combined with subject matter expertise as well as an appreciation and understanding of school context. These conceptions contrast with earlier beliefs that teachers need only acquire

strong disciplinary knowledge in order to become effective teachers and to lead discussions of literature (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

Given the breadth and depth of knowledge required, dialogic discussions of literature represent an especially challenging pedagogy, particularly for beginning teachers. By their very nature, discussions are far less predictable than lectures, seatwork, or other teacher-directed pedagogies (Dillon, 1994). Moreover, teachers must be able to draw on knowledge from multiple domains in order to effectively exercise pedagogical judgment as they encounter the “unavoidable uncertainty” (Shulman, 1998, p. 516) inherent in many classroom discussions (Bridges, 1988). Such uncertainty does not often correspond with beginning or prospective teachers’ desire for planned activities and ordered classrooms (Edelsky, 1993; Fuller & Bown, 1975; Lampert, 1985). For example, if a novice teacher is uncertain about his or her content knowledge or pedagogical content knowledge⁶, or whether or not a discussion will “work,” or which direction the discussion might go, that novice may not likely risk initiating a discussion. Research suggests that under conditions of uncertainty, beginning teachers rely on and revert to familiar images of teaching. They draw on their own schooling experiences as they plan for and lead their own discussions. In the following paragraphs, I review some of the central challenges associated with learning to teach English.

Apprenticeship of Observation

When students enter pre-service teacher education programs in the English language arts, many believe they already know what it means to teach English (Agee,

⁶ Both “content knowledge” and “pedagogical content knowledge” have been defined in numerous ways. Later in this section, I will attempt to unpack the various meanings of these terms, and the subsequent implications for learning to teach.

1998, 1997; Wilson, 1990). In addition to six or seven years of secondary school, most have taken several courses in English composition or literature during their first years of college. Over this period of time, they have participated as students in countless discussions of a relatively unchanged list of canonical texts (Applebee, 1993). Applebee shows that, until very recently, high school and university English courses have featured many of the same texts and/or authors for the past century. As a result of these experiences and practices, teachers have developed an almost mechanical sense of what it means to lead a discussion of literature, constituting an “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975) for learning to teach high school English.

Lortie argues that years of observing teachers teach and students learn in particular ways make it difficult for novice teachers to consider, plan, and enact different visions of teaching (Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1985). Aspiring English teachers enter pre-service teacher preparation programs with a wealth of ideas and beliefs about what it means to teach reading, writing, and other language arts skills. The same is true for discussions of literature. They have pre-existing conceptions of what it means to lead discussions, both in terms of content (i.e., what should be taught) as well as pedagogy (Grossman, 1990), making it difficult for them to imagine or be open to other approaches or strategies for engaging students. In her study of the discursive practices in two graduate courses – one in the English department, the other in English education – Addington (2001) identifies a potential source of these pre-existing beliefs.

Relying primarily on discourse analysis, Addington discovers that her English class focuses more on textual understandings and allows less space for tentative understandings than her English education seminar. In the education class, because the

teacher created and cultivated a dialogic space, he and his students share equally in co-constructing literary meaning and interpretation. The discourse featured numerous occasions of overlapping talk, with a much higher percentage of student talk than teacher talk. By contrast, the English class featured more “presentational” talk, both from the teacher as well as the students, and regardless of speech genre, the teacher overwhelmingly dominated the classroom space and talk. Drawing on the orientations and experiences of her instructors, she offers the following analysis of her findings:

In Greg’s department of English education, much research centers on how students learn, whereas in Dr. Robertson’s department of English, research centers on texts and literary criticism. Both cultures become vital playing fields for students who are (or intending to become) teachers of secondary school English, who tend to take many courses from both departments (p. 222).

Addington’s claims challenge us to consider where pre-service English teachers develop theories of literary interpretation. In other words, if most literature courses in departments of English do, in fact, emphasize textual or new critical interpretations, will this lead pre-service teachers to emphasize – explicitly or otherwise – such a stance or perspective in leading discussions of literature with their students? Marshall and Smith (1997), in their study of the gap between the pedagogical theories of a university department of English and practicing secondary English teachers, point out that teaching strategies are the “classroom enactments of interpretive theories that are contestable – and contested” (p. 263). From a Bakhtinian (1981) perspective, given the multiple and competing messages pre-service English teachers experience regarding discussions of

literature, it behooves us to better understand how novices make sense of these events and experiences, and what they do once they do with their students once they close their classroom doors.

Addington's (2001) study raises an important question regarding the influence of the apprenticeship of observation on teacher authority during discussions of literature: How and where do pre-service teachers develop conceptions about the role of the teacher during discussions? Her study suggests that in college literature courses where teacher power or authority is rarely challenged, the "grammar" of schooling (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) prevails. That is, because in schools teachers traditionally stand and talk and students sit and listen and absorb information, most students in any program rarely question these norms. Addington writes, "Dr. Robertson (of the English department) never claimed an authoritative role for himself in the classroom, but both he and his students were so engrained in the long-standing tradition of what it means to be a teacher that he was granted a special position of authority whenever he sought it or not" (p. 233). While Addington does not mean to imply that English teacher educators or their students engage in practices that are necessarily different from these traditions, she does suggest that by "continuing to examine discourse in university English and English education courses, researchers can build understanding of how those specific communities, with their differing disciplinary philosophies, impact pre-service teachers' perceptions of what constitutes fruitful literary discussions" (p. 243).

While Addington's study emphasizes the role departments or colleges of English play in shaping teacher learning around discussions, other studies suggest that pre-service teachers draw on a broad range of experiences (i.e., Agee, 1998; Clift, 1991; Grossman

1990). In a case study conducted by Clift (1991), for example, a pre-service English teacher draws on her memory of her favorite high school class to plan her first discussion of literature in a senior English class. Though she hopes to create an atmosphere where everybody in the class will, “. . . put [their] chairs together and talk back and forth” (p. 361), Clift observes that the teacher’s prior experiences in English classrooms does not equip her with the strategies or improvisational skills needed to engage students in a discussion of literature. Although she is able to draw upon her knowledge and experiences as a student to replicate the physical qualities of a discussion (i.e., where students should sit), she has not yet developed the pedagogical tools or strategies to enact the type of discussion she envisions. Further, “she had no image or procedure to help her know whether her instruction was a success or a failure” (p. 362). This is the central limitation of the apprenticeship of observation.

Grossman’s (1990) study of beginning English teachers suggests the apprenticeship of observation includes any number and combination of experiences. Grossman follows six teachers into their first year of teaching high school English, three of whom went through traditional teacher preparation programs, three of whom did not. She concludes that courses in teacher education can help prospective teachers to distance themselves from their prior school experiences, and to help them begin to grasp the complexities of teaching and learning. She explains that education professors urged students to “‘rethink’ the familiar, from the perspective of the theoretical frameworks they were developing in class” (p. 127), whereas non-education professors did not. In addition, one education professor used “overcorrection” – emphasizing less traditional activities and assignments during class – as a strategy to help students overcome the

power of their prior experience in classrooms. Grossman ultimately concludes that while there are clear and observable differences between education and non-education majors in terms of teaching, the apprenticeship of observation remains a powerful influence on English teacher learning.

For one thing, the apprenticeship of observation makes conceptual change difficult. Building on Strike and Posner's (1985) theories on the conditions necessary for conceptual change, Agee (1998) studies students' beliefs about teaching literature before and after a pre-service English methods course. She seeks to better understand the agents of change in the course – in other words, what is necessary to undo or at least complicate beginning teachers' beliefs about teaching literature? To answer this question she observes the course for ten weeks, conducts interviews with the professor and students, videotapes small and large group discussions, and administers a survey before and after the course. She concludes that in order for conceptual change to occur, students must experience cognitive dissonance between their prior beliefs and experiences and the ideas introduced in the course. Moreover, she notes:

Prior experiences . . . can operate in two ways. Positive, deeply valued, prior experiences caused many of (the) students to resist unfamiliar ideas, especially if they appeared to discredit or be incompatible with their prior experiences. In contrast, unpleasant prior experiences in English classes were valuable in facilitating conceptual change (p. 117).

Said differently, prospective English teachers who experienced positive learning opportunities in their English classes are unlikely to change their beliefs about what it

means to teach literature. As teacher educators, the lesson we can take from her study is that prospective English teachers will come to our classes with a wide range of experiences and beliefs about teaching English. One of our first goals should be to learn about these experiences and beliefs, and to use them as we prepare our students to become English teachers. I now turn to the issue of subject matter (or content) knowledge, and the challenges English teacher educators often face with respect to pre-service teacher learning.

Knowledge of English Language Arts

Subject matter knowledge, or content knowledge, includes knowledge of the key concepts, facts, principles, and explanatory frameworks of a discipline, as well as the rules of evidence that are used to guide inquiry in the discipline (Grossman, Wilson & Shulman, 1989). From a critical perspective, it also includes knowledge of the relationship between traditions of the discipline and the dominant ideology (Connell, 1985; Giroux & Simon, 1984), knowledge of the capacity to read against and with texts (Apple, 1993), knowledge of the discipline as an object to be acted upon by students and their representations (Wexler, 1982), and knowledge of the relationship between the discipline and social class (Anyon, 1981). Subject matter knowledge, as defined here, plays two central roles in shaping how teachers learn to lead discussions of literature.

First, a teacher's knowledge of literature will influence the way he/she leads interpretive discussions with his/her students. The less conceptual understanding a teacher has of a particular text, the more likely he/she will find it difficult to lead open-ended, dialogic discussions of that text. The Clift (1991) study mentioned earlier provides

a clear example of this relationship. The novice teacher in that study did not feel as though she had a sufficiently strong background in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1996). Thus, in preparation for an interpretive discussion of that text, the teacher conducted research on the book through a variety of sources, including a *Cliff Notes* edition of Joyce's book. In an interpretive discussion with her students the following day, the teacher directed her students toward the interpretation suggested in the *Cliff Notes*, and simultaneously failed to recognize or honor her students' own perspectives. In doing this, she taught in ways that contradicted her beliefs about teaching and opening space for student voice in the classroom. In sum, because she was insecure about her content knowledge, she felt unprepared to lead the kind of discussion she had hoped to facilitate.

Studies in other content areas have yielded similar findings in terms of the impact of limited content knowledge. One study by Borko et al (1992) investigated a novice math teacher whose primary goal was to teach through dialogically-organized instruction. The researchers found that because of her limited conceptual understanding of the division of fractions, she was unable to support students' authentic investigations of math problems. Instead, the teacher provided her students with "rules" for solving math equations, a strategy that contradicted her pedagogical goal of "making mathematics meaningful" to students. This study, among others (including Ma, 1999), suggests that limited content knowledge can impeded a beginning teacher's ability to enact their vision of good teaching. One prerequisite for teachers interested in dialogic instruction, therefore, is deep disciplinary thinking, understanding, and knowledge.

The second role subject matter knowledge plays in learning to lead discussions relates to teachers' orientation toward literature. As noted earlier, two approaches currently dominate literary study – one that puts emphasis on the text, the other that puts emphasis on the transaction *between* the reader and the text. A third approach, and one that can often be found in high school English classrooms, is the reader-response approach. In this approach, neither the text nor the transaction between the reader and the text are as central as the reader's personal experiences in relation to the text. But as Appleman (2000) writes:

We may have “balkanized” the response-based classroom, thus precluding the possibility of questioning our personal experiences. Since our responses to literary texts are particularly and uniquely ours, then what is it that anyone, teacher or classmate, could offer that would either enrich or contradict them? (p. 29)

In other words, Appleman argues, reader-response approaches to literature may preclude meaningful discussions of literature because of their uniquely personal nature. As an alternative to solely focusing on reader-response, Appleman suggests that teachers incorporate critical literary theories into discussions of literature. She argues that by teaching students to critically examine and discuss literature from feminist, Marxist, and postmodern literary theories, in conjunction with reader-response approaches, teachers will “provide students with a way of reading their world . . . [and to] explore the differences between and among us, what separates us and what binds us together” (p. 3; Greene, 1993; Rogers & Soter, 1997). For Appleman, it is through exploration of what

separates us as well as what binds us together that will engender productive, meaningful discussions of literature with students.

This orientation to literature contrasts with those mentioned earlier. From a New Critical perspective, for example, the teacher encourages students to discover, or extract, the author's meaning or intention from the literature. As Wilhelm (1995) writes, "New Criticism assumes the text to be an integrated and coherent whole, and it monolithically determines meaning which can be gleaned through 'close readings' of the text" (p. 15). Discussions of literature from this perspective move toward specific interpretations, which generally come from the teacher. Other teachers may see this process more collective, and encourage students to move toward a collective interpretation. Purves et al (1995) argue that the role of the teacher during discussions of literature is to "build toward a class interpretation or several interpretations that are truly class interpretations, not just the teacher's or the one in the textbook and the one that is expected on the test" (p. 91-92).

An English teacher's view of testing also factors into his or her orientation toward literature instruction, and therefore discussions of literature. Teachers who feel pressure to prepare students for district or state-mandated tests may approach discussions of literature very differently from those who do not. Ultimately, the orientation or interpretive stance that an English teacher takes toward literature – New Critical, reader-response, postmodern, etc. – will govern not only what counts as knowledge in the classroom, but also the degree to which students are invited to participate in the construction of that knowledge. The same might also be said in terms of teachers'

understanding and appreciation of students' diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Understanding and Appreciating Diversity

While subject matter knowledge and the apprenticeship of observation impose clear constraints on learning to teach, socio-cultural issues often represent considerably deeper challenges and limitations (Britzman, 1991; Delpit, 1992, 2002; Florio-Ruane, 2001; Gee, 1996; Grant & Secada, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Rose, 1989). Moreover, given the recent steady decline in the number of people of color who pursue teaching careers, these challenges will likely intensify (Florio-Ruane, 2001; National Commission, 1996, 1997). As Grant (1994) writes:

If it hasn't happened already, urban teachers will soon find that the new teacher across the hall or the new teacher next door will be a White female whose first choice for a teaching assignment was a suburban school. These new colleagues may have some of the knowledge, understanding, and attitudes necessary for teaching urban students, but, for the most part, their backgrounds will be limited and superficial (p. 316).

This is not to say that young, White, female teachers cannot be responsive to the learning needs of culturally diverse students. As Ladson-Billings (1994) demonstrates, successful teachers of culturally diverse students are those who embrace a "culturally relevant pedagogy," regardless of their own racial or socio-economic identity. But this does not diminish the challenge of learning to teach diverse students, often in school

environments that contrast with one's own school experiences. These challenges can be divided into three, broadly defined categories. They are: 1) the challenge of overcoming pre-existing beliefs about culturally, socio-economically, or linguistically diverse students; 2) the challenge of meeting the needs of students whose learning styles differ from one's own, or teaching in ways that contrast with one's school experiences; and 3) the challenge of confronting identity, privilege, and racism (and classism), both individually as well as societally.

Research suggests that beginning teachers believe minority students or those from lower socio-economic situations are not as academically capable as their white, middle-class classmates (Cochran-Smith, 1997; Irvine, 1990; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Padron, 1994). Goodwin (2001) writes that in urban schools with large percentages of African American students, "Race (is a) crippling factor when it comes to how children of color are perceived and treated by their teachers" (p. 70). Gouldner (1978), and later Winfield (1986), attribute teachers' unparallel expectations of black and white students to "middle-class behaviors" (p. 254). That is, because white, middle-class teachers are more familiar with "middle-class" behaviors – and therefore less familiar with "non middle-class" behaviors – they are less likely to think there is anything "wrong" with their middle-class students.

Winfield (1986) further argues that differential treatment and expectations originate from pre-existing beliefs and assumptions teachers hold about their students' families and backgrounds. She writes, "Teachers attribute the achievement-oriented behaviors of white students to factors such as motivation . . . black students to parental encouragement and heredity" (p. 254). Implicit in her claim is the shameful notion that

teachers regard white students as inherently more bright than black students. Nieto and Rolon (1997) argue that the same is true for ethnic Latino students when compared to their white classmates. In addition to lumping all Latino students into one cultural group, teachers typically believe that Latino students are less capable than white students. These assumptions about students of color have harmful and costly implications. As Fueyo and Bechtol (1999) write, the correlations between teacher expectations and student achievement “are familiar and well documented” (p. 29). In short, teacher expectations often become self-fulfilling prophecies for minority or low-income students: they fail to achieve because their teachers believe they will fail. As Zeichner et al. (1998) write:

Youngsters who enter school with ways of learning that differ from the expected norm are often seen by educators as deficient. Unfortunately, when teachers hold a deficit view of certain children, they lose the ability to make accurate assessments of those children’s strengths and limitations, because they tend to emphasize what the youngsters cannot do rather than what they are capable of doing well (Hilliard, 1989; Moll, 1986; Villegas, 1988) (p. 167).

Lipman’s (1998) study of two urban schools in the process of restructuring illustrates what happens when teachers hold a deficit view of students. Teachers in her study, and particularly white teachers, made speculative judgments about their African-American students’ personal lives to justify deficit explanations for academic failure. Lipman’s interviews with teachers suggested a widely shared cultural model of defective home environments and negligent parents that led to student deficiency. Thier justifications for academic failure raise serious concerns about the confluence of forces

working against student achievement for students of color in urban schools and classrooms. Cross (1997) adds that, “Teachers have helped define self-esteem as a problem and in the process have framed urban children as social deviants” (p. 85). She urges education theorists and practitioners to “challenge the . . . assumptions and popular conceptions they now create and sustain” and to “redirect their good intentions in an informed dialogue and improve their practices based on the *needs* of children” (p. 85, italics added), as opposed to pre-existing beliefs about these needs.

As these and numerous other studies suggest, the challenge teachers face in overcoming pre-existing beliefs about culturally, linguistically, or socio-culturally students is significant. But what is required to change and overcome these beliefs and assumptions? In a study of 17 pre-service teachers in culturally diverse urban schools, Fry and McKinney (1997) report that in order to achieve authentic, culturally sensitive pedagogical change, beginning teachers “must confront personal beliefs and attitudes” (p. 187). In order to do this:

Pre-service teachers need opportunities to examine discrepancies between their perceived and their actual abilities in teaching culturally different children, including an analysis of underlying personal philosophies and cultural attitudes . . . (and) to critically examine pre-conceptions and attitudes toward cultural issues within a diverse community of peers (p. 198-199).

In other words, by confronting beliefs and assumptions through field experiences that are well-supported and integrated with university methods courses, beginning teachers can become more culturally aware and better prepared to teach culturally

different children. But this confrontation represents only one portion of the challenge. Another, as Zeichner et al. (1998) suggest above, is for teachers to build on what children naturally bring with them to school, their “funds of knowledge” (Moll, 1986). Ladson-Billings (1995) calls instruction that builds on student knowledge in this way “culturally relevant pedagogy.” And while others have used different words to represent essentially the same thing (Haberman, 1995; Villegas, 1991), they all raise similar but important questions, including: What are the implications for teachers whose school experiences or cultural norms contrast with those of their students? How can teachers learn what knowledge their students bring to school? How can they meet their students’ learning needs and address their learning styles when these needs of styles may differ sharply from their own? These questions constitute the second category of challenges for learning to teach in diverse settings.

Heath’s (1983) study demonstrates the contrast in discursive practices between students from varying socio-cultural and economic communities. Moreover, as suggested earlier, she shows that schools promote – tacitly, if not openly – white, middle-class ways of talking and interacting at the expense of students from non-white or lower socio-economic backgrounds. Byrd, Lundeberg, Hoffland, Couillard, and Lee (1996), drawing on a study by Shade and New (1993), argue that the contrast in style is especially sharp between white teachers and African-American students:

Most European-American teachers (in the study) were more oriented toward a passive style, which gave the impression that the communicator was somewhat detached, literal, and legalistic in use of language. Most African-American (students), however, found this . . . style distancing and dissuasive. African-

Americans seemed to prefer warm and supportive teachers and a socially interactive environment (p. 433).

Of course, this should not suggest that all white teachers are passive and all Black students prefer warm, engaging instruction (or, for that matter, that white students do not prefer teachers that are warm and engaging). However, it does implore teachers to be cognizant if not vigilant of the tacit ways in which their cultural selves inform their teaching, and potentially marginalize students from contrasting backgrounds. They must seek to understand as much as possible about the lives of their students, to learn about their interests and dreams as well as their learning styles and struggles. Anything less puts in jeopardy the success of students, particularly those from backgrounds that contrast with that of their teacher. As Byrd, et al. (1996) write, “Misunderstandings of cultural styles have led to inaccurate estimations of students’ intellectual potential, learning abilities or achievement in academic subjects, and language abilities (Hilliard, 1992)” (p. 433).

But what does it mean to understand students’ varying cultural styles in order to become a culturally-responsive teacher? Drawing on the work of Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995) and others (i.e., Sleeter, 1995), Fueyo and Bechtol (1999) identify four central elements. They are: 1) rejecting deficit paradigms about the cultural, linguistic, or racial backgrounds of the students in comparison to other students; 2) knowledge of the interaction of the students’ culture and the prevailing school culture; 3) incorporating the contributions of the students’ culture into the curriculum; and 4) modifying instruction to facilitate academic achievement among students from diverse groups (p. 29). Combined,

these elements constitute an enormous challenge for teachers, regardless of years of experience but especially for pre-service or beginning teachers who come from socio-cultural backgrounds that differ from those of their students. Further, as Alvermann, et al. (1996) note, understanding cultural (or gender) difference and how it impacts teaching and learning is quite apart from doing things in the classroom that are relevant and sensitive to culture (or gender). They write:

It is one thing to know, in an abstract way, that (culturally-informed) discursive practices are primarily about power relations and . . . how we learn to think, act, and speak in different social situations; it is quite another thing to recognize them as they operate in our everyday lives (p. 96).

In other words, teachers may understand – in theory – that their teaching styles are culturally bound and may not, therefore, engage students from diverse backgrounds. However, this understanding does not necessarily translate into action, and some teachers may continue to teach in ways that privilege some students while they marginalize others. This point leads us into the third broadly defined category, which is the challenge of confronting identity, privilege, and racism (and classism), both individually as well as societally. Cochran-Smith (1995a) has thought and written in depth about this challenge, and the thorny terrain that encompasses it, so I quote her here at length:

I worry about how we can have more open discussions about race and teaching . . . How can we open up to unsettling discourse of race without making people afraid to speak for fear of being naïve, offensive, or using the wrong language? Without making people of color do all the work, feeling called upon to expose

themselves for the edification of others? Without eliminating conflict to the point of flatness, thus reducing the conversation to platitudes or superficial rhetoric? . . .

I have become certain only of uncertainty about how and what to say, whom and what to have student teachers read and write, about who can teach whom, who can speak for or to whom, and who has the right to speak at all about the possibilities and pitfalls of promoting a discourse about race and teaching in pre-service education (p. 546).

Cochran-Smith suggests that conversations about the relationship between race and teaching are essential and necessary, even if they are “unsettling” and contentious. A recent study by Carson and Johnston (2000) supports both the importance and complexity of such discussions. In their study of a teacher educator’s initial efforts to begin a conversation about culture and diversity with her 25 students, the instructor received a range of responses, from anxiety to acquiescence to resistance. Several weeks later, after a four-week field placement in a culturally diverse school, the instructor and her students began to engage in open, honest discussion of these issues. The researchers concluded that when teacher education students are forced to confront “difficult knowledge” (p. 75) regarding (in this case) racism and oppression, “they are initially reluctant, even resistant, but eventually are able to have productive conversations” (p. 75).

The catalyst that allowed them to move beyond anxiety and resistance was the field experience coupled with a “pedagogy of compassion,” where the teacher “attempts to build trust in the classroom (by) recognizing the need to learn about the realities of other people” (p. 81). Beginning with Joyce, the instructor, and followed by several

students in the class, participants shared deeply personal and honest stories of oppression or of their (previously undisclosed) cultural heritage. One student, Dan, talked for the first time about his Native Aboriginal ancestry. His father was Native and his mother was white, but Dan had never felt a strong pull to the Native culture until he taught in the field at a school that had a large Aboriginal population. The experience allowed him to confront difficult issues on a personal level, and then move to a discussion of institutional racism and oppression in education with and among his peers.

This move might not have been possible with a less culturally-diverse TE class, or with an instructor who did not embrace a pedagogy of compassion that allowed her class to move beyond the “cycle of blame and guilt that can characterize the critical anti-racist classroom” (p. 81). As Tatum (1994) writes, “White students . . . often struggle with strong feelings of guilt when they become aware of the pervasiveness of racism in our society” (p. 463). Thus, if white pre-service teachers are to meaningfully contemplate the relationship between racism (and classism), identity, and privilege in schools, teacher educators need to create space for them to move from “the abandonment of individual racism . . . (to) the recognition of and opposition to institutional and cultural racism” (p. 463). They need to help them develop an “informed empathy” rather than a sense of “sympathy” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 234). As Carson and Johnston (2000) suggest, these are not easy tasks for teacher educators, particularly given the adverse physical and organizational conditions that characterize so many diverse, urban schools (Kozol, 1991).

Feld and Basso (1996) argue that context and setting can take the form of character just as much as individuals. If this is true, then we must consider and implicate the context of the urban school as well as the white teacher in why racism and oppression

perpetuate in schools. Cochran-Smith (1997) writes, “There are enormous structural inequities embedded in the social, organizational, and financial arrangements of schools and schooling that perpetuate dominance for dominant groups and oppression for oppressed groups” (p. 44). Given these inequalities, what impact does context and setting have on pre-service teacher learning? To what extent are beginning teachers able to distinguish between what their students are able to achieve and the oppressive setting in which they learn? In the following section, I address these questions.

Issues of Context and Setting

Related to the socio-cultural challenges pre-service teachers face in learning to teach diverse students is the climate in which they encounter and work with these students. Ladson-Billings (1999) writes, “The context of the urban setting creates a challenging environment – issues of limited school funding, more inexperienced and under-qualified teachers, greater teacher turnover, and more students assigned to special classes and categorical programs are endemic in urban schools” (p. 233). Kozol (1991) describes these conditions in graphic, perhaps startling detail, to explain the devastating impact that insufficient and inequitable funding has had on urban schools.

Given these accounts of the physical conditions of urban schools, it behooves us to ask what effect such conditions have on pre-service teachers’ beliefs and attitudes toward students, teaching, and learning. Rushton’s (2001) study of Mary, a pre-service teacher placed in an “inner-city” (p. 150) school comprised primarily of low-income, minority students, addresses this question. Mary is a white 22 year-old female who characterizes herself as a “liberal-minded feminist” who planned to dedicate her life to

bringing about ‘equal rights for others’” (p. 150). She hoped to inspire her students, to caringly treat them as capable, thoughtful individuals, to “give underprivileged children a better start than she’d had, particularly in reference to the types of (physical and sexual) harassment she had encountered while in high school” (p. 151). Drawing on data from multiple sources, Rushton explains why Mary was not able to achieve the goals she set for herself during her internship:

It seemed to me that three kinds of conflict significantly affected Mary’s internship: those involved in understanding and dealing with the life experiences encountered by children in the inner-city, those with herself in establishing a balance between being a friend to her pupils and become their respected teacher, and those with the university over the failings she saw in the Urban/Multicultural Education program. Throughout all of her experiences, Mary maintained a firm belief that she had been “called” to become a teacher and that she was determined to complete her student-teaching experiences, no matter how adverse she perceived things to be” (p. 152).

Mary completed the internship, but only because of her immense fortitude, dedication, and perseverance. The experience taught her a great deal about the lives of children who attend urban schools, about the adversities many of them face on a daily basis, and about the balance between creating friendly rapport with pupils and the need to maintain authority and discipline (Walberg, 1968). Rushton (2001) concludes that while pre-service teachers “deserve only the highest praise” (p. 157) for their willingness to learn to teach in such demanding environments, they also need to be “monitored for risk

of early burnout” (p. 157). Without adequate support, pre-service teachers may learn to doubt their capacity to become agents of social change. Rushton writes:

Most student-teachers undergoing school placements find it a time of anxiety and self-doubt . . . The results of this study supported and then went beyond those of Lantz (1964) regarding the importance of developing confidence in student-teachers. Lantz (1964) maintained that student-teachers should be placed in non-threatening classrooms so that their sense of self-efficacy could grow (p. 157).

Mary grew and developed as a teacher as a result of her “accepting the dissonance that the harsh realities of teaching in the inner-city brought” (p. 158), and not as a result of adequate mentoring or support.⁷ Rushton doubts whether other pre-service teachers would have been as successful. Fry and McKinney (1997), citing Pasch et al. (1993), agree, writing, “The critical differential training factor is ‘provision of early, ample, and carefully supported fieldwork in urban schools’” (p. 187). Others, such as Haberman (1987), argue that such support and experiences do not go far enough, that what is needed is a “track of special preparation leading to an urban teaching license (that is taught by) faculty in schools of education who have urban teaching experience” (Fry & McKinney, 1997, p. 187). It is to this debate, situated in the context of learning to teach in formal teacher education programs, that I now turn.

⁷ Mr. Rice, Mary’s mentor teacher, was stern – even harsh – toward the students, who only emphasized to Mary the importance of establishing a strong, disciplinary presence when working with urban students.

Teacher Education

In their review of learning to teach, Wideen et al. (1998) highlight the gap between the hopes and expectations of teacher educators and the experiences and expectations of pre-service teachers. They confirm previous findings that teacher preparation has little impact on teacher beliefs (Wilson, 1990). At the same time, they critique the research on learning to teach and contend that much about learning to teach is still unclear, particularly in terms of preparing teachers for diversity and dealing with broader issues of multicultural education and systemic reform (Wideen, 1998). Beginning teachers, they argue, cannot easily assimilate and implement the skills and strategies taught in teacher education courses. Teacher educators must first provide opportunities for prospective teachers to study their beliefs about teaching and students and then negotiate a teaching role within notions of good practice. Britzman (1991) characterizes the process of learning to teach as a “biographical crisis,” saying, “It is not a mere matter of applying decontextualized skills or of mirroring predetermined images; it is a time when one’s past, present, and future are set in dynamic tension” (p. 8).

Whether or not teacher educators make full use of this tension and pre-service teachers’ life experiences is not clear in the research literature. However, the research does suggest that, in general, university coursework plays a minor role in learning to teach (e.g., Lanier & Little, 1986), and that the best way to change teachers’ beliefs about teaching is to provide them with increased experiences with pupils (Wideen et al, 1998). This view seems particularly relevant when preparing teachers to work with students who differ from themselves in terms of race, culture, social class, or linguistic background.

At the same time, as Ritchie and Wilson (1993) point out, the quality and nature of these experiences are critical. In a study of 25 prospective English teachers, the authors documented teacher learning and beliefs in the context of a highly regarded teacher education program. As predicted, candidates began the program with strong beliefs about what it means to teach English, and what it means to be an English teacher (Grossman, 1990; Lortie, 1975). Most believed that the teacher played a central role in the classroom, and that effective instruction was very teacher-centered (for example, lecture, recitation, etc.).

The teacher education program in which these students were enrolled promoted and taught a more student-centered approach, which they themselves enacted. Researchers believed that through participation in these course as well as various student-centered activities and experiences during the program, prospective English teachers would substantively change, even abandon their teacher-centered views of teaching. Instead, they found that students' experiences in traditional, teacher-led classrooms – in both high schools as well as college – overwhelmed their limited experiences in more student-centered classrooms. They concluded that if conceptual change is to happen, teacher educators need to provide pre-service teachers with continual opportunities to be engaged in learner-centered classrooms.

In short, learning to teach is a highly complex process, and one that is difficult to assess because it is intertwined with teachers' prior beliefs and experiences about teaching, learning and schooling (Bird, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984). Further, as Borko and Putnam (1996) assert, the routines of teacher education programs often impede pre-service teachers abilities to reflect on

and learn from their practice. Student teaching, for example, is typically perceived by pre-service teachers as an opportunity to practice teaching rather than learning to teach (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1987). In addition, traditional ways of teaching and learning that characterize university and field placement classrooms often obstruct authentic change in teacher thinking and learning (Borko & Putnam, 1996). To address these impediments, to make learning to teach an educative experience, Dewey (1904) argued for teacher education to become more theoretically-grounded, to help prospective teachers develop deep intellectual understandings about teaching before they even go into the field.

Learning to teach becomes further complicated when situated in contexts that are unfamiliar to pre-service teachers (Haberman, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Zeichner et al., 1998). Haberman (1995) writes:

Completing a traditional program of TE as preparation for working [in today's urban classrooms] is like preparing to swim the English Channel by doing laps in the university pool. Swimming is not swimming . . . Completing your first year as a fully responsible teacher in an urban school has nothing to do with having been "successful" in a college preparation program (p. 2).

Ladson-Billings (1999) adds, "(The) traditional approach to training is counterproductive for future teachers in poverty schools since it leads them to perceive a substantial number – even a majority – of 'abnormal' children in every classroom" (p. 232). Teacher education programs have attempted to respond to these concerns by increasingly providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to learn about and/or work

closely with students from diverse backgrounds. Many advocate a segregated approach (Zeichner, 1992) that require students to take courses that focus on issues of diversity, or to spend some time working in diverse k-12 classrooms. However, as numerous researchers have argued, these opportunities often serve to reinforce pre-service teachers' beliefs about minority children or children from low-income families. Fry and McKinney (1997), citing McDiarmid and Price (1993), write:

After analyzing the experiences of 17 student teachers representing five universities, it was concluded that the presentation of information under the rubric of multi-culturalism perpetuated stereotypical thinking and prejudice toward certain groups of people (p. 187).

At the same time, Finney and Orr (1995) argue, "Cross-cultural experiences should not take place in a sheltered world [even though] moving out of a classroom or laboratory into the real world will likely mean that students will experience more than they wish" (p. 333). In short, preparing students to become thoughtful, culturally-responsive teachers is a precarious task that is replete with limitations, irrespective of context or pedagogy. This conundrum prompts the question: What types of opportunities might teacher educators provide in order to help students become successful teachers in diverse urban schools? Perhaps Zeichner and his colleagues (1998) respond to this question quite succinctly. They write:

The key elements . . . on the development of greater multicultural teaching competence are: a) careful planning and monitoring of the experiences, b) careful preparation of students for the experiences, c) placement of prospective teachers

in schools that are in the process of working toward more culturally responsive and multicultural teaching, and d) regular opportunities to reflect about the experiences under the guidance of teacher educators who have been successful multicultural teachers themselves (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 1996; Zeichner & Miller) (p. 168).

Clearly, teacher educators must carefully plan and scaffold learning opportunities for pre-service teachers. They must think carefully of their students as learners, and be aware of the teaching and schooling experiences each of them brings to the teacher education program. They must recognize and supply the support needed to help their students learn to teach. Of course, this is good advice for all teacher educators, but of particular importance for those learning to teach in unfamiliar contexts, working with students whose backgrounds differ in some way from their own. The ultimate purpose in doing this work is to create “sensitive and caring schools where teachers are empowered decision makers and all students are respected and feel as sense of connection, intimacy, visibility, and self-worth” (Irvine, 1994, p. 4).

In this section, I have reviewed some of the central challenges in learning to teach. I have examined the relationship between pre-service teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, learning, and practice, and have shown that prospective teachers enter pre-service programs with strong ideas about what happens in schools. While teacher educators expend tremendous effort to challenge these notions, research suggests they are largely unsuccessful. On the other hand, some research indicates that powerful teaching and mentoring in school and university settings can positively influence teacher learning and

practice. But how do these settings interact or intersect with each other? How do they complement or contradict each other? What is the nature of these settings, and how do they align or compete with pre-service teachers' existing beliefs and ideas about subject matter, students, schools, teaching and learning?

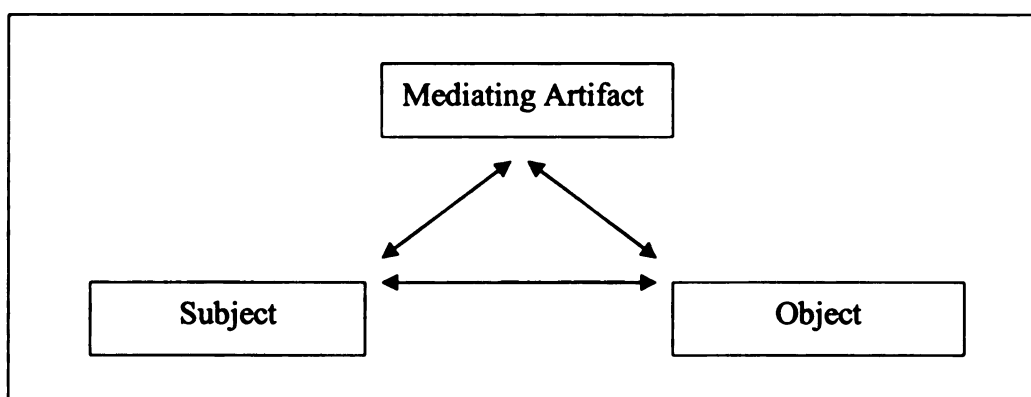
Through my exploration of the research literature, I began to understand the contradictory nature of teacher education – how interns' field placement experiences often contradict what they learn at the university, how interns' beliefs about creating dialogic space during discussions are often thwarted by competing views and perspectives, how interns' own schooling experiences often conflict with the activities in which they participate in teacher education coursework. This exploration also helped me to realize that in order to understand how pre-service English teachers learned to lead discussions of literature, I needed to develop a theoretical framework that would help me make sense of the overlapping settings and experiences of teacher education. Because of its emphasis on learning through and across multiple settings, I determined that *socio-historical activity theory*, or *activity theory* for short, would effectively serve this purpose. Below, in the final section of this chapter, I discuss activity theory, explain its history and features, and talk about its role in my study. My use of this theory as a theoretical framework ultimately led me to reshape my research questions, which I present in Chapter Two.

Theoretical Framework: Activity Theory

Activity theory draws from and builds on the work of the Russian philosopher Lev Vygotsky. In essence, Vygotsky (1978) asserted that learning is socio-culturally and

historically situated; that what and how we learn depends on the context in which we learn (Grossman, Smagorinsky & Valencia, 1999). This assertion sharply contrasted with two orientations that dominated psychology in the 1920s – psychoanalysis, founded by Sigmund Freud, and behaviorism, founded by John B. Watson and later developed by B. F. Skinner. Both of these approaches emphasized a direct relationship between humans and their environment; Vygotsky refuted and was dissatisfied with this view. He, along with Alexander Luria and Alexei Leont'ev, argued that such relationships were mediated by cultural means, including tools and signs. They developed a model of mediated action – known today as activity theory – that can be characterized by the following diagram (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Model of Mediated Activity



As the above figure suggests, humans interact with their environment through cultural artifacts, the most common of which is language. For Vygotsky and his colleagues, one significant limitation of both the psychoanalytic and behaviorist orientations to psychology was their inability to specifically explain how humans interact with their surroundings; their model of mediated action, they believed, explained these relationships.

In terms of learning and development, the psychoanalytic and behavioral orientations presented additional problems, as least for Vygotsky and his cohorts. Perhaps most significantly, neither orientation addressed socio-cultural or historical aspects of learning, an important feature of what eventually became known as activity theory. Vygotsky, in fact, delineated two planes of development: *inter-psychological* development, meaning between people, and then *intra-psychological* development, meaning within individuals. He writes, “Social relations or relations of people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relations” (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 163). In other words, who we are and how we think develops through our ways of being and communicating and relating with and to others.

Before moving to a discussion of current applications activity theory, I should clarify a point related to its origin. Although Vygotsky is widely recognized as the founder of socio-historical development, it was his pupil, Alexei Leont’ev who theoretically integrated social relationships into Vygotsky’s triangle (figure 1). Leont’ev distinguished between collective activity and individual action, which paved the way for a second generation of activity theory. His distinction ultimately evolved into a three-level model of activity, as depicted in Table 1.1 (below).

Table 1.1: Hierarchical Levels of Activity Theory Model

Level	Oriented toward	Carried out by
Activity	Active / motive	Community
Action	Goal	Individual or group
Operation	Condition	Routinized human or machine

Leont’ev’s hierarchy of activity illustrates the inter-connectedness of relationships between human beings. As Engestrom (1999) explains: “The uppermost level of

collective activity is driven by an object-related motive; the middle level of individual (or group) action is driven by a goal; and the bottom level of automatic operations is driven by the conditions and tools of action at hand” (p. 4). Leont’ev’s example of the “collective primeval hunt” effectively illustrates how these hierarchical levels relate to each other in any activity system:

Collective hunting is the activity, the prey is its *object*, and hunger for the prey is its *motive*. When beaters make noise to frighten the game, the clapping of their hands is an *operation*, and the beating as a whole is an *action* within the hunting activity, motivated by the hunger to be fulfilled by the realization of the activity. This noise making action has as its *goal* the frightening of the game. However, this goal contradicts the object and motive of activity, which is to catch the animal and distribute and consume the food. The beaters’ action is part of the activity on the basis of their conscious knowledge that they frighten the game so that it can be caught. This implies that human *consciousness* has an engaging and a mediating representational aspect. The beaters’ action is only possible on condition that they represent the link between the goal of their action and the motive of the cooperative activity. They must be able to represent relations between objects, irrespective of their actual needs, or else they would simply go for it themselves and therefore in many instances fail to obtain the object. Their specific and particular consciousness is constituted through its content, which has meanings as elements. Through the *meanings* they are able to represent the connection between the motive and the goal of the action; in this way they are

engaged in the activity; it makes *sense* to beaters (Leont'ev, as quoted in Axel, 1997, p. 138).

Leont'ev's story of primeval hunting provides a clear illustration of how activity systems work. First, it explains the hierarchical structure of such systems - from the collective activity of hunting, to the action of beating, to the operation of clapping one's hands. Second, it demonstrates the relationship between these three levels; that is, success of one depends upon success of the others. And finally, it illustrates the inherent contradictions within any productive activity system. In this case, the goal of frightening the game contradicts the motive of the activity, which is to catch the animal and distribute and consume the food.

This movement between levels, and the associated contradiction, are central features of activity systems. As Engestrom (2004) writes:

An activity system is always heterogeneous and multi-voiced (Bakhtin, 1981) . . . There is (also) constant construction and re-negotiation within the activity system. Coordination between different versions of the object must be achieved to ensure continuous operation. Tasks are reassigned and re-divided, rules are bent and re-interpreted (p. 3).

Engestrom's explanation reflects the current generation and thinking of activity systems. In the above passage, drawing on Bakhtin's notion of *heteroglossia* (1981), he presents activity systems as highly dynamic processes. The construction of knowledge, as well as relationships between subjects and objects, is constantly and continuously re-

negotiated. But as Leont'ev points out, with this re-negotiation comes a productive level of tension:

The internal tensions and contradictions of activity systems are the motive force of change and development. They are accentuated by continuous transitions and transformations between these components of an activity system, and between the embedded hierarchical levels of collective motive-driven activity, individual goal-driven action, and automatic operations driven by the tools and conditions of action (Leont'ev, 1978, p. 9).

In other words, change and development happen *as a result of* the tension and contradictions of activity systems. As members of an activity system interact with each other, and as they pursue both individual and collective goals that may contradict each other, tension is generated that enhances learning and development. As Bakhtin (1981) also argues, tension is a necessary and productive aspect of all discourse. Moreover, if we are to understand how people communicate with and learn from each other in social settings, we must carefully attend to the associated tension. He goes on to characterize discourse, or dialogue, as “an intense interaction . . . a process in which [one’s own and another’s word] oppose or dialogically inter-animate each other (p. 354). He writes further:

One’s own discourse is gradually and slowly wrought out of others’ words that have been acknowledged and assimilated, and the boundaries between the two are at first scarcely perceptible (p. 345).

In other words, we unconsciously borrow words and ideas from each other, and then take them with us to different settings and encounters. This notion seems especially relevant to my study, given the multiple and often competing messages pre-service teachers experience about teaching and learning to teach, and the diverse activity settings in which they experience these messages. In many ways, Gutierrez' notion of the "third space" in classrooms is a useful metaphor for understanding the co-constructed, evolutionary nature of knowledge and social interaction in activity systems. She writes:

It is important to recognize that dialogue is not simply between people and languages, but within people and between the evolving internal dialogizations people use to categorize experience (Bakhtin, 1981). When a true dialogue between students and teacher occurs, rather than random associations between their scripts, a new traditional, less rigidly scripted space – the third space – is created. Within this space, there is more than a random association between script and counterscript; an actual merging of (individuals') world views occurs.

And finally, in an effort to extend this discussion of learning through activity systems even further, I turn to the work of Lave and Wenger (1991). In essence, Lave and Wenger argue that learning happens as people participate at the periphery of practice, in "legitimate peripheral participation" with more experienced others. In other words, people experience an apprenticeship through participation with others in which they gain the ability to participate with increasing sophistication. Learning happens over time and in social settings with relative "experts." Activity theory emphasizes the nature and context of these settings, as well as the tools that are appropriated and carried through

them (Grossman, et al., 1999). But it also emphasizes what learners bring to the settings, and what and how they think about the future. As Grossman et al. (1999) write, “A central concern of activity theory is to understand the kinds of culturally defined futures that motivate people’s activity and the sorts of tools they develop in order to help mediate one another’s progress toward those futures” (p. 5). Given the context of my study – a teacher preparation program – the concept of future orientation seems particularly relevant, so I will touch upon this a bit more in the next chapter.

In addition to this, my discussion of activity theory will take a more practical turn in Chapter Two, as I present it as a conceptual framework for my study. I begin the chapter with my research design, followed by an explanation and rationale for my methods of data collection and analysis. In these sections, I will show how and why I used activity theory as my conceptual framework, particularly its focus on tools as mediating artifacts. And finally, in the next chapter, I describe the contexts and participants of my study, point out some potential limitations, and situate my pursuit of interpretive research in the ethnographic tradition.

CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

My study was designed to investigate how pre-service⁸ secondary English teachers learn to lead discussions of literature in culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse classrooms. In this chapter, I first provide a rationale and description of the research methods and design of my study. I begin with an overview of my research methods, and describe how an interpretive approach ultimately led me to see the value of activity theory as a way to understand teacher learning. I then describe my use of activity theory as a conceptual framework for my study, after which I provide a set of reformulated research questions. I then describe the design of my study, including the context, participants, and methods of data collection. And finally in this chapter, I present my methods of data analysis, followed by an examination of some significant limitations of my study.

Research Methods

As discussed in Chapter One, discussions of literature hold potential for opening dialogic space in the classroom, and facilitating student understanding and achievement. But learning to lead effective discussions can be a challenging endeavor, particularly in unfamiliar contexts and with students from diverse backgrounds. As my research questions in Chapter One suggest, the aim of my research was to learn how the curricular

⁸ Although I occasionally use the more generic term “pre-service teachers,” my focus in this study is on student teachers – that is, pre-service teachers who are in the final phase of their teacher education program, typically characterized by full-time planning, teaching, and assessing in a local public school. At Middletown University, where I conducted my research, student teachers are called “interns” or “teacher interns;” in this study, I will use the “intern” when referring to my participants.

experiences of a secondary English methods program – which included interns’ field placement classrooms – informed interns’ understanding of discussions of literature. I also wanted to understand how interns’ beliefs about discussions, as well as their beliefs about students in diverse, urban schools, shaped their learning. For these reasons in particular, I determined that an interpretive approach was the most appropriate method of inquiry for my study.

An Interpretive Approach

As I began my research, I wanted to understand how English interns learned to lead discussions of literature from an “insider’s” perspective. I intended to conduct naturalistic research as described by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) – that is, in participants’ natural settings, with as little interference or distraction as possible from me, the researcher. I approached my study as an outsider, and did not presume to know anything about what interpretive discussions meant to my participants. Moreover, although I was familiar with the English methods program⁹, I did not assume to know anything about the particular learning opportunities of the specific courses with respect to discussions of literature. Given the importance of understanding how the experiences in the secondary English methods course may have shaped and influenced interns’ knowledge and thinking about discussions of literature, I decided to use an interpretive method of inquiry (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

An interpretive approach, I reasoned, would allow me to understand how my participants – all secondary English interns – understood the learning opportunities and

⁹ In fact, I taught several courses in the program, including the methods course that preceded the year-long methods course on which this study was based.

experiences provided by the secondary English methods program, which I describe in more detail below. In particular, I was interested in learning more about the year-long English methods course – or English methods seminar – candidates enrolled in during their final year in the program¹⁰. My goal was to enter interns' conceptual world by observing them engage in activities and experiences intended to help them learn what it means to lead discussions of literature (Erickson, 1986; Geertz, 1973). Gaining access to interns' perspectives and thinking required that I understand what *they* experienced and how *they* interpreted the world. As this process started, and through continuous exploration into the research on teacher learning, I began to understand a central and inherent problem with this goal: interns' thinking and understanding was constantly and continuously changing and evolving. As interns engaged in various activities and experiences provided through the course, they simultaneously embraced multiple, often competing beliefs and perspectives. In other words, interns neither experienced nor interpreted the world in a single, linear or coherent manner. Instead, understanding was a dynamic, multi-faceted process.

As a researcher hoping to conduct research that was truly interpretive, I needed to develop a framework that could accommodate and respond to interns' multi-dimensional ways of being and thinking. Moreover, I reasoned, this need was augmented by the fact that interns took the secondary English methods seminar at the same time they completed their field placements, or student teaching assignments. In fact, as I will later explain, these two experiences worked in conjunction with each other. That is, the experiences of

¹⁰ For clarity, I will refer to this particular course as the English methods seminar from this point forward. Seminar seems an appropriate term for the course since it was held once per week during the student teaching semester (or internship), and because of its focus on issues directly related to interns' field placement experiences.

one were used to shape and inform what happened in the other, and vice versa. The overlapping nature of these experiences, coupled with interns' dynamic thinking processes, ultimately led me to *activity theory* as a conceptual framework for understanding how secondary English teachers learn to lead discussions. In the following section, I explore the origins of activity theory, as well as its attributes, limitations, and applications to my study.

Activity Theory as a Conceptual Framework

Teachers teach for a variety of reasons (Grossman, et al., 1999). Some focus on building relationships with students, overlooking the academic dimensions of the profession. Others see teaching as a way to continue their involvement with and love for subject matter. Still others are attracted to teaching as a means toward working for social justice. All of these imagined futures are important as they intersect and interact in social settings, or "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where practitioners of different imagined futures, diverse backgrounds and varying years of experience shape and are shaped by each other. For these reasons, and because of its emphasis on the future, activity theory offers a useful framework for "illuminating how teachers choose pedagogical tools to conduct and inform their teaching" (Grossman, et al., 1999, p. 4). Grossman and her colleagues build on Wertsch's (1985, 1991) elaboration of activity theory to describe three essential themes of an activity theory framework. These three themes – activity settings, identity, and tools – will serve to direct what and how I attend to data collection and analysis in my study. I now turn to a brief explanation of each, and discuss their intended relationship to my study.

Activity Settings

Activity theory, Grossman et al. (1999) write, “is fundamentally concerned with the context for human development” (p. 6), contexts which mediate the development of consciousness (Sarason, 1972). These contexts, or *activity settings*, are at the center of what and how we learn, according to activity theorists (Cole, 1996; Engestrom, 1999; Engestrom & Miettinen, 1999; Wertsch, 2000). But contrary to what “setting” may suggest, activity settings are less about space and location than they are about experiences. For example, as pre-service teachers move through programs of teacher education, they participate in numerous activity settings: their field placement, their methods courses, informal conversations with their peers, etc.

At times, this participation is tacit or informal – for example, drawing on and using the languages of their professors, mentor teachers, field supervisors, and peers to inform their approach to teaching English. At other times, this participation is explicit and purposeful – for example, participating in a discussion in their methods course on the challenges associated with writer’s workshop, or leading a discussion in their field placement classrooms. According to activity theory, all of these “settings” are relevant in understanding how teachers learn to teach. Grossman et al., (1999) identifies and differentiates five aspects of activity settings, all of which will be important for my study. They are: motive, individual constructions of the activity settings, socio-cultural history of activity settings, boundaries, and activity settings of pre-service teaching.

Motive refers to the intended outcome of each activity setting, and may be individually or collectively determined. With regard to my study, there are two important things to say about motive. First, it is important to recognize that one motive in an

activity setting often comes at the expense of another. As Wertsch (1985) writes, “The motive that is involved in a particular activity setting specifies what is to be maximized in that setting. By maximizing one goal, one set of behaviors, and the like over others, the motive also determines what will be given up if need be in order to accomplish something else” (p. 212).

The second point is that multiple and competing motives can often (and do) coexist within an activity setting, though some typically predominate over others. Student teaching provides a useful example. From one perspective, the goal of student teaching is to try out practices in a supportive environment. From another perspective, the goal is to demonstrate one’s competence as a teacher en route to graduation or certification. As a conceptual framework, activity theory allowed me to attend to the multiple, competing, and/or dominant motives of each activity setting.

Individual constructions of the activity settings refers to the ways in which individual learners construe settings based on their unique goals, histories, and experiences within or about settings; in other words, the connotative versus denotative meanings of settings. In thinking about schools, for example, Lave (1988) draws a distinction between “arena,” the visible, physical structure of a school, and “setting,” the individual’s construal of a school (poor, working class, underachieving, etc.). This distinction seemed relevant to my study given the multiple connotations of “urban” in the context of “urban education” or “urban schools.” As I collected and analyzed data across multiple activity settings, I tried to take into account the history that each participant brought to each activity setting (Smagorinsky & O’Donnell-Allen, 1998a).

Sociocultural history of activity settings refers to taken-for-granted structures and institutions about which we rarely question due to their cultural or historical ubiquity. This aspect of activity theory seemed particularly relevant for my study given the widespread belief among pre-service teachers that teacher education programs are meaningless and insignificant (e.g., Conant, 1963; Kramer, 1991). As these and other researchers point out, teachers generally believe they already possess the knowledge and skills needed to become effective teachers (for example, Labaree, 2000; Lanier & Little, 1986), and that what they need most is exposure to real students in real classrooms.

Grossman et al. (1999) describe how this aspect of activity settings connects to teacher learning. They write, “Socio-cultural (activity) theory helps focus attention on the culture existing within schools that often disregards the importance of university preparation for teaching, a culture that strengthens the authority of the school as the venue for learning to teach” (p. 10). In other words, activity settings are never insular events or experiences; they are interrelated to our systems of beliefs. As I observed and interviewed my participants, and analyzed the resulting transcripts, I attended to the underlying socio-cultural roots of their beliefs about teaching and learning to teach.

Boundaries refer not only to the overlap between activity settings, but also to the overlap that individuals in a particular activity setting experience. Grossman et al. (1999) explain that activity settings are never discrete entities. Rather, they intertwine with and are subsumed by other activity settings, resulting in a complex web of co-existing settings that may simultaneously influence and be influenced by one another. Pre-service teachers, for example, act within activity settings that are bounded by the classroom. But these settings are also part of a school, which is part of a district, which exists within a

statewide system of public education. Each of these settings may emphasize different goals and expectations for beginning teachers, which require them to constantly cross boundaries. In addition to these challenges, each individual in an activity setting reflects a unique set of activity settings. While pre-service English teachers may, for example, experience certain activity settings together – for example, the English methods seminar and program requirements – they also experience rather unique ones like their field placement classrooms, exchanges with their mentor teachers, and even conversations with their peers as they drive to and from campus together. As a researcher interested in learning about how English teachers learn to teach, I had to carefully attend to each of these settings, and the permeable boundaries between them.

Finally, *activity settings of pre-service teaching* refer to the wide array and number of distinct activity settings that constitute teacher education. As Grossman et al. (1999) write, these include “university coursework and the specific classes that make up the program curriculum; field experiences, including initial observations as well as full-time student teaching; supervision; and the overall program, including the ways in which students are admitted and organized and the ways in which all participants relate to one another” (p. 11). Further, they explain, “Each of these activity settings has its own specific motive, structural features, sets of relationships, and resources for learning to teach” (p. 11). The authors point out that these activity settings are complicated by the fact that pre-service teachers must simultaneously enact a *teacher* role and a *student* role (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985). That is, even as prospective teachers work toward becoming full-time teachers and all the responsibilities that entails, the university setting typically reinforces and rewards success for the student role. As I progressed through my

study, I tried to remain cognizant of this dichotomy, what Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985) call the *two-worlds* pitfall.

Identity

As the literature reviewed suggests, learning to teach is replete with challenges – challenges which Britzman (1991) argues contribute to the development of identity as a teacher. But what is the relationship between identity development and the activity settings in which pre-service teachers participate? Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that identity results from and contributes to a broader set of relationships in the context of relationships with others in activity settings. They write:

Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities, which are in part systems of relations among persons. The person is defined by as well as defines these relations. Learning, thus, implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities” (p. 53).

In other words, identity development and learning in and from an activity setting are reciprocal processes; they shape and inform each other. But since pre-service teachers encounter nuanced variations of the challenges associated with learning to teach, part of my effort was to understand “how prospective teachers and those around them define the

problems they face and how they engage in solving these problems, using the resources around them” (p. 12). But even as I attempted to understand this process, I also had to attend to the ways in which my participants’ individual senses of identity shaped and were shaped by the quality and nature of the activity settings in which they participated. As Agee (1998) notes, prospective English teachers enter teacher education programs with strong beliefs about what it means to be an English teacher. As I explain in Chapter Three, I made an effort to understand, honor, and respect these beliefs.

Tools

Finally, as Grossman et al. (1999) clearly articulate, “An activity theory framework for studying teacher learning would need to be concerned with identifying the tools that teachers use to guide and implement their classroom practice” (p. 13). These tools, which the authors categorize as either *conceptual tools* or *practical tools*, are what teachers use to construct and enact their teaching practice. By conceptual tools, they mean the “principles, frameworks, and ideas about teaching, learning, and English/language arts acquisition that teachers use as heuristics to guide decisions about teaching and learning” (p. 14). Interpretive discussions of literature, and the instructional scaffolding required to help students participate in discussions of literature, provide an appropriate example of a conceptual tool. In my study, I was interested in understanding the ways in which pre-service English teachers participated in activity settings around these conceptual tools, and in the ways in which they used these conceptual tools to guide their teaching practice. Other conceptual tools I thought about but did not closely investigate included their understanding of constructivism as it relates to discussions of

literature, of culturally-responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1999), and of literary theories including feminism, Marxism, deconstruction, and reader-response.¹¹

Practical tools include the “classroom practices, strategies, and resources that . . . have more local and immediate utility” (Grossman et al., 1999, p. 14). In the context of English teacher education, among the more central practical tools are lesson plans, instructional practices, textbooks, and school or district-endorsed curriculum guidelines or frameworks. A focus of my study was to examine the ways in which my participants adopt or *appropriated* both conceptual and practical tools across multiple activity settings and for various goals and purposes.

As I have suggested, the settings in which pre-service teachers participate are varied, and each compels them to think differently about their practice. This raises several questions, all of which I attempted to investigate through my inquiry, including: How do pre-service teachers’ ways of thinking change as they move from one activity setting to another? What and whose words or ideas do pre-service teachers borrow and appropriate as they move across these settings? What influence do these newly introduced ideas have in these settings? All of these questions became important as I incorporated heteroglossia and dialogism into my activity theory framework. Below, I offer a reformulation of my research questions that builds on the principles of activity theory suggested above.

¹¹ These are among the literary theories that have been formally emphasized in the secondary English methods course. While this does not suggest they were the *only* literary theories considered, they are the only ones explicitly addressed in the program coursework.

Reformulated Research Questions

As noted in Chapter One, the central research question as I began my study was: *How do pre-service English teachers learn to create and cultivate dialogic space during discussions of literature with, culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse students in urban schools?* Although this question still reflects the central goal of my research, my exploration into activity theory and its application to my study led me to reformulate my research questions. They became, in order of focus: 1) *How do the experiences and activities of a secondary English methods course – the English methods seminar – help interns learn what it means to lead discussions of literature in culturally, linguistically, and socio-economically diverse classrooms?* 2) *What role, if any, do the tools and settings of a secondary English activity system play in shaping and informing interns' beliefs about discussions of literature and their role in leading them in diverse, urban classrooms?* 3) *How are the tools of a secondary English activity system shaped and shaped by interns' beliefs about discussions of literature? What role does tool-mediation play in teacher learning in the secondary English activity system?*

By viewing the secondary English methods seminar as an activity system, I was better able to attend to and understand the overlapping nature of its multiple tools and settings. Later in this chapter, I show how methods of data collection were developed with this view of the course in mind. First, however, I present a description of the context and participants of my study, as well as a description of and rationale for case study as an appropriate and useful approach to my research.

Research Design

Context: Secondary English Teacher Education

As suggested above, my study looked not only at how English interns learned to lead discussions of literature, but also at the opportunities to learn provided through the secondary English methods seminar. Specifically, my study focused on the final semester of the secondary English teacher education program at Middletown University. During this final semester, interns completed their student teaching, or teaching internship, at the same time they participated in a weekly professional English methods seminar. One of the central themes of this semester-long course was discussions of literature.¹²

Middletown University is large state university located in a relatively small metropolitan area (with a population of approximately 200,000 people). Students at the university typically apply and are admitted to the teacher education program during their sophomore year. During their junior year, teacher candidates typically take courses in general education; they do not take any subject-specific teacher education courses, with the exception of those offered through their respective disciplinary departments or colleges. Secondary English pre-service teachers, for example, take courses in rhetoric and literature during their junior year, but do not officially enroll in English language arts methods courses until their senior year. Also during the junior year, most students enroll in a course entitled “Human Diversity, Power, and Opportunity in Social Institutions.” Informally, the course is known as the “diversity course,” as it addresses the relationships between teaching and learning and race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

¹² While the syllabus for the course does not explicitly mention interpretive discussions of literature, in practice the tasks, assignments, and conversations emphasize this quality or type of discussion.

Although my study does not formally investigate the learning opportunities provided by and through this course, I mention it here because of its connection to my broader research questions. Most students in the Teacher Education program at Middletown University have had little experience with or exposure to students from non-white or non-middle-class backgrounds. To the extent possible, the diversity course aims to address this deficiency. Based on my experience as an instructor of the English teacher education program, the diversity course is often the first opportunity students have to discuss relationships between race, privilege, and power in schools and society. Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, it is the diversity course that often leads students to request an internship in a diverse, urban school.

In the fall of their senior year, prospective English teachers enroll in a two-semester course in English language arts teaching methods. Whereas the first semester addresses the teaching of writing, the second focuses on the teaching of literature. My study did not investigate teacher learning or opportunities to learn during these semesters. However, as I later explain, I used information I collected during these semesters as baseline data for each of my participants.

The same holds true for other courses taken by participants. That is, although I did not formally collect and analyze data from these courses, I used what I learned as baseline data for my participants, individually as well as collectively. As noted previously, the focus of my study was the final semester of the program, where discussions of literature received primary emphasis and attention. In addition to observing and taping most of the class sessions from this final semester, I interviewed teacher candidates, observed them lead discussions in their field placement classrooms,

and examined various artifacts from their practice. Below, I describe these and other sources of data used for my study. First, I turn to a description of my participants, along with an explanation of how they were selected.

Selecting Participants

As noted above, I was interested in understanding how pre-service English teachers who work in diverse, urban schools learn to lead discussions of literature. Thus, my first requirement for selecting participants was to identify interns who taught in these contexts.¹³ Of the interns in the English methods seminar, six fit this criterion.¹⁴ Of the six interns, five had been together in the same cohort since the senior year English methods course. The sixth intern, Emily, began at the same time but was enrolled in the other section of the preceding course (there were two sections). All eight of the interns I studied, however, were in the same section of the English methods seminar since the start of their internship year. I believed these parallel experiences were important given my attempt to investigate the influence of various activity settings, including the seminar and interns' field placement classrooms.

The remaining two interns taught in what are generally considered suburban schools, even though each of these schools – just like the urban schools – are very unique places, non-generalizable places. My rationale for including two interns from non-urban settings in my study was to use the apparent contrast as a potential source of insight. As I thought about this design, I did not know for certain how, if at all, the inclusion of these

¹³ As suggested much earlier, my use of the word “urban” aligns with how the schools and districts in my proposed study use the term. That is, I only characterize schools and districts as “urban” if they in fact characterize themselves as urban.

¹⁴ From this point forward, to avoid confusion, I will refer to pre-service teachers as interns, as it was during their student teaching internship that I collected data.

interns would enhance my study. I only hoped that, given the impact of the field placement experience on teacher learning, they might afford me different opportunities to examine my research questions. In Table 2.1 (on the following page), I provide some basic information about each participant in my proposed study. As the table suggests, all but one of my participants are Caucasian, and most are female. While neither was by design, I had good reason to study white, female teacher candidates – namely, that they characterize the typical student in formal teacher education programs. It therefore seemed worthwhile to understand what informed their thinking, how they made sense of learning opportunities in teacher education programs, and how these opportunities and experiences informed and/or intersected with their existing beliefs and prior experiences.¹⁵ The table on the following page also indicates interns' various cohorts during the last two years in the program.¹⁶

Finally, in terms of participant selection, I should note that I studied only those interns who agreed to participate in my research. And while several interns who taught in suburban schools expressed a desire to participate, the two I selected were based on the fact that they came from different cohorts and taught in different types of settings.

¹⁵ I should note that it also behooves us to learn more about why so few minority students are enrolled in the teacher education program at Middletown University, and in programs across the country. But as important as this question is, it is for another study and well outside the limits of this one.

¹⁶ Although, as noted earlier, all are currently in the same cohort of the professional English methods seminar.

Table 2.1: Basic Information on Study Participants

Intern	Race / Gender	Senior Year	School / Description
Steve	Asian-American male	Cohort 1	Empire High / Urban
Austin	Caucasian male	Cohort 1	Empire High / Urban
Matt	Caucasian male	Cohort 1	Empire High / Urban
Stephanie	Caucasian female	Cohort 1	Elwood High / Urban
Rachel	Caucasian female	Cohort 1	Redwood High / Urban
Emily	Caucasian female	Cohort 2	Redwood High / Urban
Julia	Caucasian female	Cohort 1	Lockhart High / Suburban
Kathy	Caucasian female	Cohort 2	Upton High / Suburban

Case Study

I chose the case study approach because I believed it would allow me the opportunity to conduct an in-depth investigation into the thinking and learning of participants, and how they made sense of formal and informal opportunities to learn to lead discussions of literature (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Case study seemed an appropriate design since my hope was to be able to understand more about teacher learning and its possible sources. As Yin (1984) writes, “Case studies . . . are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes . . . and the investigator’s goal is to expand and generalize theories” (p. 21). In my case, I hoped to expand theories about learning to teach, particularly for teachers working in unfamiliar contexts such as diverse, urban schools.

Methods of Data Collection

In order to ensure high quality data, and to inductively generate theory from my analysis, I drew data from multiple sources. These included observations and videotapes of the English methods seminar, observations in interns' field placement classrooms, videotaped discussions of literature, artifacts of teaching and learning, observations of the English Educator Network (EEN) meetings, structured interviews with participants, and informal conversations with course instructors and mentor teachers. Below, I describe each of these sources, and provide my rationale and specific methods of data collection. Unfortunately, I was not able to collect complete data sets for each intern. While I acknowledge this as a limitation of my study, I was still able to triangulate the data I collected from the other sources of data.

Baseline Data

As noted earlier, I looked at baseline data from a variety of sources, all of which I collected during the semesters leading up to the English methods seminar. By looking at this data, I hoped to get a sense of where my interns were with discussions before they were formally introduced to them in the English methods seminar. The data included: 1) videotapes of participants leading a discussion during a teaching lab in the fall of their senior year; 2) videotapes of participants leading a discussion of literature during the spring semester of the senior level methods course; and 3) essays written in response to these discussions and/or any other assignments related to discussions.

Observations and Videotapes of the Professional English Methods Seminar

Perhaps the important data came from notes I took while observing as a participant-observer (Calderhead, 1981). In addition to periodically visiting the senior year methods course (the year earlier), I attended nearly every meeting of the English methods seminar during the Spring semester. Informally, I also participated as a co-instructor for the course, and on one occasion even substituted for the regular instructor, who had to attend to a family emergency. As a participant, I freely shared my insights on discussion topics, including leading discussions of literature. Because of my consistent presence and occasional participation, my interns seemed to pay little attention to my research interests (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). This “insider” perspective allowed me to gain a much richer and “thicker” sense of my participants’ thinking and learning in this activity setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Geertz, 1973).

In addition to participating on this level, I videotaped nearly every class session of the English methods seminar. With its emphasis on discussions, these videotaped lessons provided a rich source of data, as interns watched their peers lead discussions in their field placement classrooms and then talked about the lessons in the English methods seminar. By videotaping each and every class meeting, I was able to look across the semester to better understand where participants developed conceptions of good discussions of literature, how they built on and drew from each other’s ideas, and the relationship between what they learned in the university course and what happened in their placement classrooms. As my data will show, this final point was especially relevant for some of the interns who taught in diverse, urban classrooms, given their unfamiliarity with such contexts.

Field Observations in Placement Classrooms

A second significant source of data was the teaching interns did in their field placement classrooms. I observed each participant lead a discussion at least once; for five of the eight interns, I was able to observe a second discussion. I also took note of the physical classroom space – how the seats were arranged, what posters hung from the walls, and the condition of the furniture and teaching materials. In addition, I paid attention and noted how the interns interacted with their students, and how the students responded. I noted how students listened to each other, or what they did (if anything) when the teacher wasn't looking in their direction. While none of these were necessarily or substantively related to discussions of literature, I believe my field notes would help me triangulate my data, or add texture to the videotaped discussions.

Videotaped Discussions of Literature

During the course of the semester, I collected at least two videotaped discussions from each intern in their field placement classroom. In some instances, if I was observing as well, I videotaped the lesson myself. Most were completed in February or March as part of a major assignment in the English methods seminar. Specifically, interns were asked to develop a research question related to discussions of literature, and to videotape themselves leading two discussions in their placement classrooms.

These videotaped discussions served two central purposes in my study. First, they helped me to formulate useful and appropriate interview questions. By watching the videotapes before each interview, I was able to ask focused questions about where interns learned particular discussion strategies, or how certain experiences influenced their

thinking. Second, the videotapes will allow me to triangulate data I obtained through interviews with my participants. What people say they do and learn is not always a true reflection of what they do and learn (MacIntyre, 1981). Becker (1996) argues that good social science researchers must investigate both.

Artifacts of Teaching and Learning

As noted above, the course syllabus provided an important data source for my study. Through the syllabus for the English methods seminar I was able to get a sense of what interns had read about discussions, as well as the specific nature of their assignments. I was able to understand the role and significance discussions played in the seminar, and to see how their opportunities to learn were connected to their field placement experiences. And finally, the course syllabus provided me with a record of activity for the course, which was helpful in triangulating data from other sources.

In addition to the syllabus for the seminar, I collected papers interns wrote in response to discussions they lead in their field placement classrooms. As mentioned earlier, interns were required to select a research question around discussions and to write about what they learned through leading discussions in their field placement classrooms. The papers they wrote provided me with additional insight into my participants' thoughts and beliefs about discussions. They also helped me to confirm and disconfirm some of my emerging hypothesis, and to understand where interns' teaching practice did not reflect what they hoped to accomplish in their classrooms.

And finally, I collected and examined the discussion rubric developed by the English Educators' Network (EEN). The EEN was a collaboration of English education

faculty at Middletown University secondary English mentor teachers. At the start of the English methods seminar, interns were given a copy of this discussion rubric (see Appendix A). The purpose of this rubric was to provide interns and their mentor teachers with a heuristic to help them develop their practice of leading discussions. However, as Chapter Four will illustrate, mediation around this artifact led to some interesting conceptions of what good discussions of literature look like. Ultimately, this particular teaching artifact played a rather significant role in my study of teacher learning, one much greater than I had expected or anticipated.

The English Educator Network

As suggested above, the English Educator Network (EEN) played a significant role in shaping learning opportunities around discussions for pre-service English teachers, particularly those in my study. For two years, I participated rather peripherally in this group by attending meetings and developing its website. I was particularly interested in their work and conversations around discussions of literature. Although this source of data was not directly relevant to my study, it was helpful to have been part of these discussions since so much of the English methods seminar focused on discussions and the discussion rubric the EEN developed.

In addition to this, five of the English teachers in the EEN served as mentor teachers to my participants, all of whom worked and taught in diverse, urban schools. Although I never formally interviewed these mentor teachers, a definite limitation of my study, I did have informal conversations with them throughout the semester. These chats helped me to better understand the perspectives of my participants, and what they were

hoping to accomplish in the discussions they led with their students. These conversations also helped me to understand some of the challenges the interns faced, as many of the mentor teachers held rather traditional views of teaching and of leading discussions. And finally, my conversations with mentor teachers helped me to triangulate some of the data I collected from other sources, in particular my interviews with interns and the videotaped discussions from their field placement classrooms.

Formal Interviews with Participants

Perhaps the most important source of data for my study was the formal interviews I conducted with participants during the final weeks of their semester in the English methods seminar. These interviews lasted approximately 1 ½ to 2 hours in duration, and took place in what I hoped were neutral, unthreatening settings (such as local cafes, etc.) A copy of the interview protocol is included at the end of my study (see Appendix B). In some cases, I conducted follow-up interviews with my participants, either in person or via the telephone. In some cases, I did this for clarity on something an intern may have said. In other cases, I conducted follow-up interviews because I wanted additional information on something they shared in our initial meeting.

The overarching purpose of these interviews was to understand how and where English interns learned to lead interpretive discussions of literature. While most of my questions dealt with their semester in the English methods seminar, I also asked them to comment on their experiences in the program overall. I asked them about their experiences in and with discussions of literature, and to talk about which skills and dispositions they believed teachers needed in order to successfully lead discussions. And

finally, quite directly, I asked them to comment on their beliefs about discussions, and how these have or have not changed as a result of the English teacher education program in general, and the English methods seminar in particular.

As noted earlier, when I described the conceptual framework for my study, I was particularly interested in the activity settings and tools through which my participants learned to lead discussions of literature. I saw my interviews with interns as a place to pursue these questions and issues by having them talk about the formal and informal experiences, activities, and settings that shaped their thinking and beliefs. To this end, I asked participants to watch segments of themselves leading discussions of literature, and to comment on these clips. As Erickson and Schultz (1982) found, engaging participants in viewing sessions of videotapes of their own teaching allows researchers to better understand the perspectives of their subjects.

Methods of Data Analysis

As an interpretive study of teacher learning, my research employed three essential methods of data analysis – the development of grounded theory, the constant comparative method, and triangulation. All of these methods, which I describe below, operated within the context of the activity theory framework described earlier. As a case study, my unit of analysis was each individual participant of the English methods activity system. I therefore drew on each of the methods described below in looking over data from the various sources, and attempted to identify patterns and themes within each case that could then become useful in cross-case analysis.

Triangulating Data

As I have noted throughout this section, I placed tremendous value in the process of triangulation (Denzin, 1997). By using data from field notes, interviews, videotaped discussions, artifacts of teaching and learning, and interviews with field and course instructors, I was able to cross-check my interpretations and add to the richness of my descriptions (Geertz, 1973).

Developing Grounded Theory

Although I entered my study with specific goals and questions that were situated within an activity theory framework, I had no expectations about what I would learn or discover. I did, however, expect my thinking to continuously evolve as I examined more and more data at deeper and deeper levels of analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Such a process, I hoped, would eventually lead me to make sense of my participants' motivations and meanings with respect to leading discussions of literature. This method of data analysis, known as grounded theory, was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theory begins with an area of study – in my case learning to lead discussions with diverse learners in urban schools – and then allows what is relevant to emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Yinger (1978) explains that not only do hypotheses and constructs arise from the data, but they are “elaborated and refined in relation to the data as the research progresses” (p. 12). In situating this method of analysis within an activity theory framework, I was able to focus on my participants' thinking and learning, the essence of my study. As I immersed myself in the data, codes and categories emerged, many in apparent conflict with each other. Given my desire to understand my

data from my participants' perspectives, grounded theory seemed an appropriate and useful method of data analysis.

My first step in attempting to identify themes was to list my research questions and then analyze my transcribed participant interviews for seemingly related examples or counter-examples. Once I did this, I looked across the eight participant interviews and identified the following themes, beliefs, or questions: 1) Who takes primary responsibility during discussions of literature?; 2) the value of watching each other teach (in the videotaped discussions); 3) discussions about discussions in the English methods seminar; 4) the narrative assignment as a meaningful activity; 5) talking with each other outside of the English methods seminar; 6) learning by doing (in interns' field placement classrooms) ; 7) conversations with mentor teachers about discussions; 8) the English methods seminar as a model of what discussions (should) look like; 9) who talks and who does not talk during discussions; 10) distinctions between recitation and discussion; 11) preparing for or setting up a discussion; 12) the relationship between text-centered and student-centered discussions of literature; 13) the role of the teacher in facilitating discussions; 14) interns' beliefs about what students can or cannot do with respect to discussions; 15) interns' lack of experience with culturally, linguistically, or socio-economically diverse students; and 16) behavioral versus cognitive goals for discussions.

The Constant Comparative Method

While grounded theory provided a useful paradigm for thinking about and doing data analysis – as the above list of themes might suggest – it did not offer specific analytic strategies or tools. To accomplish this I relied upon the constant comparative

method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978). The constant comparative method is a particularly relevant method of data analysis for case study work in that it allows the researcher to go back and forth, between cases, proposing tentative working hypotheses. It requires the researcher to look closely at the data, revise and even reject tentative hypotheses, and then move on to the next round of data analysis. The constant comparative method is especially appropriate for interpretive studies in that even as I note patterns and themes that emerge from my data, the only way to move closer and closer to understanding from the perspective of my participants is by continually testing my claims against opposing themes or patterns.

The constant comparative method was also particularly useful for my study given the wide range of contexts in which my participants taught. While the emphasis of my study was on teachers who work in diverse, urban schools, one way to understand how they learned to lead discussions of literature was to compare and contrast their experiences with interns from other contexts and settings. Thus, as I looked across the multiple activity settings of my study, I was able to propose additional themes and patterns and tentative hypotheses. Ultimately, many of these were later ruled out by additional data, which eventually led me to a deeper understanding of my interns' beliefs and motivations regarding discussions of literature. In Chapters Four, Five, and Six, I describe and explain these beliefs and motivations in rich detail.

Once I had identified the above themes, I compared participant interviews with each other using the constant-comparison method. In order to understand interns' relationship to each theme, I examined each interview transcript for either support or opposition to each theme, and the strength of this evidence. Through this second round of

data analysis, eleven categories, or questions, emerged: 1) The relationship between moving toward lesson objectives and a discussion that is engaging but perhaps not on topic; 2) how much and whether participation from all students is essential in all discussions; 3) the need to create a classroom environment for discussions where the interplay between the teacher and students feels safe and authentic; 4) the need to address issues of race, class, and/or other issues of diversity; 5) whether and how much the teacher should open his/her personal life to the students; 6) effective preparation for students to participate in discussions of literature; 7) conflicting ideas about discussions from mentor teachers; 8) conflict about what constitutes a good discussion with respect to the discussion rubric; 9) the value of popular culture and/or other non-traditional texts in facilitating discussions of more traditional texts; 10) the relationship between lesson objectives and the type of discussion; and 11) planning for a good discussion that isn't overly prescriptive.

Since the focus of my study was on learning to lead discussions, I then went through the twelve class transcripts from the English methods seminar to identify where and how interns talked about these eleven themes or questions. In this round of data analysis, given the conceptual framework for my study, I paid close attention to how tools were used and conceived in these transcripts. Through this process, I identified five tools that seemed to play an important role in shaping the above themes. They were: 1) the discussion rubric; 2) the course literature; 3) interns' videotaped discussions; 4) the instructor's pedagogy of leading discussions; and 5) interns' beliefs about discussions. As I thought further about these five tools, and looked again the ways in which interns talked about them in mediation with each other, I found little distinction between the discussion

rubric and the course literature. For analytic and convenience purposes, I therefore collapsed these into one tool – course documents.

Finally, once I identified these tools, I went back through each of my participant interviews to collect confirming and disconfirming evidence related to each. I identified examples from interviews in which interns talked about – in support of or in opposition to – the tools identified above. Through this process, I narrowed the above list of eleven themes down to four central themes: 1) The teacher as preparer (of students as well as discussions); 2) the teacher as instructional leader (during discussions of literature); 3) the teachers as participation facilitator; and 4) interns' beliefs about students, particularly those in diverse, urban schools.

For each intern, I then made a chart in which I identified 1) their initial beliefs around each of these four categories, 2) influences of the course tools on their beliefs, and 3) their actions throughout the semester, along with their beliefs about discussions (and students, if applicable) at the end of the course. These eight charts (one for each intern) allowed me to understand how mediation around the central tools of the course – the course documents, the videotaped discussions, the instructor's pedagogy, and interns' beliefs (as conceptual tools) – shaped and informed their learning. The charts, in conjunction with the transcripts from the English methods seminar meetings, helped me to understand where and how interns deepened their understanding of discussions of literature, and the teacher's role in leading them.

In Chapter Three, I discuss interns' beliefs as they entered the English methods seminar, or activity system. In Chapter Four, I examine the role course documents such as the discussion rubric and published scholarship played in teacher learning around

discussions. In Chapter Five, I consider the powerful role the videotaped discussions played as a mediating tool for interns. In Chapter six, I illustrate how the instructor's pedagogy, although not a formal or explicit component of the course, pushed interns to think in complex ways about discussions, and the teacher's role in leading them. And finally, in Chapter Seven, I look across these four data chapters to suggest common themes in learning to lead discussions, as well as broader implications for teacher education. First, however, I conclude this chapter with a set of limitations of my study.

Limitations of Study

As I hope the design of my study suggests, my goal was to do research that truly reflected the actions, beliefs, and intentions of my participants. But as with any research that deals with human beings, my study is not beyond reproach. In the following paragraphs, I share what I believe are some central and potentially significant limitations of my study.

First and foremost, I never had the opportunity to formally interview Stacey, the instructor of the English methods course. Although I regularly talked with Stacey before, during, and after the class meetings, I failed to schedule a formal interview with her in which I could understand her perspectives on the course she had taught. Although I had planned to schedule such a conversation, our schedules filled up with other commitments, and before we realized it, the semester was over. I have little doubt that a formal interview with Stacey would have not only deepened my understanding of her pedagogy, but also deepened our understanding of interns' efforts to learn about discussions of

literature. In this sense, my failure to interview Stacey is a significant limitation of my study.

A second significant limitation of my study is its reliance upon self-report data. What interns said they believed and how and what they learned about discussions was based partially on self-report, which is problematic for any number of reasons. For example, as an instructor in the program, it is possible that my participants were telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. However, in an effort to minimize this limitation, I compared as much of this self-report data as possible to what I observed and saw in the secondary methods course and in interns' field placement classrooms.

A third potential limitation of my study is that I was not able to videotape as many discussions as I would have liked during the semester due to scheduling conflicts. In addition to this, I was only able to videotape 12 of the 16 class meetings of the professional English methods course. As a result, I may missed important information regarding teacher learning about discussions. More videotaped discussions, in the university course as well in the field placement classrooms, would have provided more data about each participant.

A fourth possible limitation of my study is the fact that I personally transcribed all data. In some respects, this is more an asset than a limitation. However, since transcription is inherently an interpretive process, and not an objective account of what was said or what happened, it does present some limitations. And finally, with eight interns, I had a lot of data, and therefore had to balance depth with breadth. It is quite possible that I would have learned more with fewer interns, but might not have gotten the sampling that I did by looking across the experiences of eight interns.

CHAPTER THREE

INTERNS' INITIAL BELIEFS

Overview

As noted in Chapter Two, my study investigated how interns engaged in mediation with each other over tools of the English methods seminar, which I have also referred to as an activity system. In Chapters Four, Five, and Six, I focus on a particular mediation tool to show what this mediation looked like. I describe and explain how mediation around these tools deepened interns' understanding of discussions of literature and their role in leading them. I discuss how mediation with each other around these tools shaped interns' practice of leading discussions in their field placement classrooms. In Chapters Four, Five and Six, I investigate the ways in which conversations around textual documents, interns' videotaped discussions, and the instructor's pedagogy, respectively, worked in conjunction with each other to complicate as well as clarify interns' understanding of discussions. Before beginning this conversation, however, I turn to an equally powerful and influential mediating tool of the English methods activity system – namely, interns' beliefs.

Engestrom (1999) distinguishes between two types of mediating tools, *practical* and *conceptual*. By practical tools, he includes tools such as the discussion rubric and the videotaped discussions; in other words, things that physically exist and can be used. Conceptual tools, by contrast, may not exist in the physical sense, but are certainly present and influential. Interns' beliefs about discussions are a good example of conceptual tools. While they are not something we can physically see, they are present

and very powerful in terms of shaping teacher learning. As conceptual tools, interns' beliefs – of students as well as discussions of literature – provided them with a foundational understanding against which they could press alternate or competing views and conceptions. In this sense, interns' beliefs were used and drawn on through the semester to deepen their understanding of the teacher's role in discussions of literature.

One way to conceptualize interns' beliefs about discussions as they began the semester in the English methods seminar is along a continuum. At one end of this continuum was the belief that teachers play a central role in facilitating discussions of literature. The teacher is actively involved, leads the discussion, and dictates its pace and direction toward specific instructional objectives. Although students might prepare and raise questions in the discussion, most of the questions – if not all of them – flow through the teacher. At the other end of this continuum is the belief that teachers play a marginal, even detached role in discussions. In these discussions, the teacher says very little, even if and when the discussion moves away from instructional objectives that he or she may have established. In this view students, not the teacher, control the pace, flow, and direction of the discussion.

Prior to the English methods seminar, as I will illustrate in the first section of this chapter, interns' beliefs were largely concentrated at either one end of this continuum or the other. In terms of facilitating discussions of literature, they either viewed the teacher's role as central and engaged, or removed and insignificant. Common to both perspectives, however, was a view of the teacher's role as fixed and relatively narrow, relatively independent of context or purpose. As I will argue in this and later chapters, through mediation with each other around their beliefs, as conceptual tools, as well as the other

course tools, interns developed a more complex understanding of the teachers' role in discussions. Conversations with each other around these tools ultimately allowed interns to embrace a view of the teacher's role that moved along, even interacted with, this continuum. In other words, through participation in the English methods activity system, interns began to understand their role in discussions of literature in complex ways that contrasted with their earlier, dichotomous thinking.

Initial Beliefs about the Teacher's Role in Discussions

Teacher as the Central Player

Interns' beliefs and views about the teacher's role in discussions of literature, prior to the English methods seminar, were largely shaped by their experiences as students, in high school as well as in college. But these experiences were by no means similar for all eight interns. Five of the interns in my study – Austin, Emily, Julia, Kathy, and Steve – believed the teacher played an active and central role in leading discussions of literature, and in moving students toward specific instructional objectives. The remaining three interns – Alexis, Matt, and Stephanie – believed the teacher played a rather marginal role, and that helping students to move toward specific instructional objectives was not a priority. In the following paragraphs, I offer an examination of these initial beliefs, beginning with the former. As Emily explained in my interview with her:

I had a hierarchy of knowledge whereas talking about the text was smart and talking about ourselves was dumb and a waste of time . . . I thought good discussions (were) textual, scripted . . . the teacher's job was to move the class toward specific objectives or "through-lines" (Interview, 5/6/03, p. 4).

Clearly, for Emily, the teacher played a central role in getting students to a certain place in the lesson. The teacher – and/or maybe the students as well – planned and led discussions of literature that (ideally) moved toward pre-established instructional objectives. And although she calls this “scripted” process a “good discussion,” it more closely resembles what educational researchers would call a “recitation.” In fact, interns who shared Emily’s view of the teacher’s role talked about their inability, prior to the English methods seminar, to distinguish between “discussion” and “recitation.” As Julia explained, “I didn’t really think much about discussions, they were more like recitation, with me asking (students) questions that moved toward my objectives” (Interview, 5/10/03, p. 3).

Austin held very similar beliefs, again based largely on his own experiences as a student. When I asked about his beliefs about discussions prior to the English methods seminar, he responded:

I never really had an open discussion experience. Like, a lot of them were really guided by teachers, and their experiences, and what they raised about life experiences. Good discussions were those where the teacher was a good storyteller, which would then bring students to open up. So that is what I thought, that discussions were really teacher-led and teacher-focused (Interview, 5/8/2003, p. 5).

Although Austin suggests the goal is to get students to “open up,” he clearly presents a picture where the teacher is in charge, where the teacher determines the flow

and direction of the discussion. Steve presented a similar image of the teacher's role. He explained:

I really thought, and in many ways still do, the teacher had to be in control . . . of everything. In fact, I had no problem with recitation. I still don't. Sometimes, like with new material, one has to model things for students. So in discussions, I just believed that, as teachers, we had to lead our students toward something (Interview, 5/2/2003, p. 11).

Steve, like Austin, presents an image of the teacher as very present in discussions of literature. The teacher is "in control" and leads his students "toward something." In the first line above, Steve implies that, although he now thinks differently about discussions, his views about the teacher's role have really not necessarily changed that dramatically as a result of his experience in the seminar. As I will show later in this chapter, and again in Chapter Four, Steve is not much different from the other interns in this respect. What *has changed* is his (and their) capacity to think about discussions in broader terms, and to link what he does (and they do) in the classroom with what he hopes (and they hope) to accomplish.

Finally, in terms of beliefs about the teacher's role in discussions prior to the English methods seminar, Kathy freely admitted, "I think the biggest thing is that, in discussions, I believed I had to control what was coming out of students' mouths" (Interview, 4/30/03, p. 3). When I asked Kathy to explain how she went about doing this, she explained:

First, I would lay down the ground rules of what a discussion was . . . we went over things like participation and what counts as something important to say in a discussion. I wanted them to see that in order to have a good discussion, we had to move toward some larger idea, something about the text . . . I also wrote and passed out questions for students to ask and answer in the discussion (Interview, 4/30/03, pp. 3-4).

In this excerpt, Kathy very clearly reveals her beliefs about the teacher's role in discussions of literature. First and foremost, the teacher is responsible for making sure students move toward "some larger idea" about the text. In order to accomplish this objective, Kathy describes two things she did in discussions she facilitated early in the semester. First, she made clear to students her rules and expectations for the discussion. This, she believed, would help them to have a "good discussion." Second, she prepared and distributed questions for students to use in the discussion. Combined, these moves suggest that Kathy regarded the teacher's role as central in terms of moving toward instructional objectives. Thus, like the other interns above, Kathy's perspective was at one end of the "teacher-involvement" continuum described above.

Teacher as Behavior Monitor

The three interns at the other end of the continuum – Alexis, Matt, and Stephanie – believed, prior to the English methods seminar, that teachers should make every effort to participate as little as possible during discussions of literature. Unlike the others, these interns believed the teacher's role was procedural more than it was instructional. As

Alexis explained, “I thought I had to stay involved (in the discussions) mainly because, if not, my students would not be able to conduct themselves” (Interview, 5/1/2003, p. 3).

When I asked Alexis whether she believed it was the teacher’s responsibility to help students move toward instructional objectives in discussions, she responded:

My thoughts on discussions came from my junior and senior year lit teacher, Mr. Linguini. He would have great discussions. We would talk the whole hour . . . maybe about current issues (that would) stem from the literature . . . he would just toss out information that was interesting, and we would take it from there, moving from topic to topic the entire period . . . so I guess no, I don’t really see the teacher as needing to be that involved in open discussions (Interview, 5/1/2003, p. 9).

Although she never specifically addressed my question, one can infer from her response that Alexis did not believe the teacher’s role in discussions of literature was to pursue specific instructional objectives. Rather, she seemed to view discussions of literature as opportunities for students to engage with each other around interesting topics and/or issues. The teacher’s role is to make sure students did not get out of control, and that they listened to each other.

Although not exactly the same, Matt had similar beliefs and experiences at the start of the English methods seminar semester. When I asked him about his beliefs about discussions prior to the course, he explained, “First and foremost, (discussion) did not rely on the quality of the teacher’s prompts, but on the ability and self-efficacy of the students in the discussion” (Interview, 5/8/2003, p. 5). In other words, students – not the

teacher – held primary responsibility for what happened in discussions. Later in our interview, Matt added, “I believed (then) that the best way to have open discussions was to allow students to talk about whatever interested them. So the teacher’s job was to allow students that space.” Thus, like Alexis, Matt did not initially see the teacher’s role as related to helping students meet specific instructional objectives.

Neither did Stephanie. When I asked her to talk about her view of the teacher’s role in discussions of literature, prior to the seminar, she explained:

I thought discussions would just happen, that if the teacher opened the class for students to talk about literature or (other texts), they would just talk, they wouldn’t need much prompting. Um, so I guess I believed the teacher’s primary role was to, just, open things up as much as possible, and to say as little as possible in the discussion (Interview, 5/10/03, p. 6).

Based on these excerpts, it seems safe to say that Alexis, Matt, and Stephanie had a very different understanding of the teacher’s role in discussions of literature than the other interns, at least at the start of the English methods seminar. Whereas the former saw the teacher’s role as getting out of students’ way in order to promote engaging and interesting discussions of literature, the latter believed the teacher played a central role in helping students and the discussion move toward specific instructional objectives.

Consensus on Preparing Students for Discussions

Although interns held divergent views about this aspect of the teacher’s role, they converged on two different aspects: 1) the teacher’s role in preparing students for the type

of thinking they would need to do in discussions of literature; and 2) the teacher's role in creating – or getting students to create – authentic and engaging discussion prompts.

First, rather interestingly, *none* of the interns talked about equipping students with the cognitive skills necessary for discussions of literature, even when I directly asked, “Prior to the English methods seminar, what did you believe about the teacher's role in terms of preparing students to participate in discussions of literature?” Most, as Stephanie suggests above, believed students would be ready and able to think and participate in discussions of literature. When I asked Austin if anything surprised him the first time he led a discussion of literature in his placement classroom, he responded, “I realized that discussions don't just happen. I mean, I thought students would just share things from the get-go, but they really didn't seem to know what to do” (Interview, 5/8/2003, p. 3).

In slightly different ways, all of the other interns told me the same thing. Prior to the English methods seminar, they believed that because their students talked about their lives with each other all the time – in the hallways, on the bus, after school, etc. – they would have very little difficulty in knowing how to participate and talk in class discussions of literature. They believed that students knew how to talk with each other, and that all that was needed was an interesting topic and a stimulating classroom environment. Over the course of the semester, through mediation with each other around the tools of the activity system, they developed a much deeper understanding of this issue. They learned that in order to get students to be thoughtful about issues and to engage constructively with each other, they had to *teach* students how to participate in discussions.

A second point of consensus among the interns prior to the semester under study concerned the creation and value of discussion questions or prompts. Interns placed little or no importance on the specific phrasing of discussion questions. They saw little or no correlation between well-crafted, authentic discussion prompts and level of student engagement in discussions of literature. Although Kathy, as noted earlier, “wrote and passed out questions for students to ask and answer in the discussion,” she hadn’t believed the phrasing or content of these questions could make or break a discussion. The same was true for Matt. When I asked how he prepared for a discussion he led early in the semester (which I observed), he explained, “I just threw down a whole array of questions to see what (would) happen” (Interview, 5/8/03, p. 1). In various ways, the other interns expressed similar beliefs and practices. As I will illustrate later in this chapter, their conceptions changed dramatically through mediation around tools of the English methods seminar.

Interns’ Beliefs about Teaching in Diverse, Urban Schools

In addition to beliefs about the teacher’s role in discussions of literature, many interns entered the English methods seminar with strong beliefs about culturally, socially, and/or linguistically diverse students, and what it meant to lead discussions in diverse urban schools and classrooms¹⁷. More important, these beliefs seemed to color how interns understood and enacted their role in discussions of literature. In fact, of the seven

¹⁷ In most cases, “diverse urban schools and classrooms” specifically refers to schools and classrooms comprised of students from various cultural, social, linguistic, and racial backgrounds. Of the eight interns in my study, the six who taught in such classrooms were Alexis, Austin, Julia, Matt, Stephanie, and Steve. The other two taught in classrooms with little or no social, linguistic, or racial diversity. Kathy taught in a school predominantly comprised of white students from middle-class families. Emily taught in a school that was overwhelmingly African-American, and most students were from middle-income families.

interns who worked with students different from themselves in terms of race or class, five made explicit connections between their beliefs about students and their practice of leading discussions, particularly at the start of the semester. Stephanie was one of those five interns.

As her internship year began, Stephanie believed she had to follow what her mentor teacher told her about “urban” students because she “had no previous experience with these kids” (Interview, 5/10/03, p. 4). At the start of the English methods seminar, as Stephanie was still learning about her students, she led a discussion on Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Of sixteen students in her 12th grade honors English class, eleven appeared to be African-American, two seemed to be of Hispanic descent, and one looked Asian American. Ten of the sixteen were female. In preparation for the discussion, Stephanie had students generate questions about the text, which they would ask of each other during the discussion. Questions included: What did y’all think about the girls not liking Rosemary? What is Frieda and Claudia’s dad’s name? Why do you think Maureen brought up the topic of nakedness, and why do you think the girls reacted the way they did? Do you think Maureen is white?

Stephanie said very little in the discussion, even when it seemed the class might have missed opportunities to deepen understanding of the text and its central themes. In my interview with Stephanie, I asked about this: “Were there occasions . . . when (students) asked a good question that you thought got passed over, not enough attention?” She responded, “Um, yes, and I noted those in my notebook, and we talked about some of those questions later . . . at the very end of the unit” (Interview, 5/10/03, p. 1). Both Stephanie and I agreed that one missed opportunity came in response to the final question

listed above, “Do you think Maureen is white?” The student who asked this question went on to add, “Because the book makes it sound like she is – she acts white, I don’t know if it’s just because she’s lighter-skinned or . . . if she really is white” (Discussion transcript). I asked Stephanie if she remembered the question, and if she did, whether she thought it was important question to pursue. She responded:

I definitely thought about that, including the fact that I am white and most of my students are not. And I think that is partly why I decided to let my students take the discussion where they wanted to take it. Um, I gave them guidelines, but then let them take control of it (Sarah Interview, p.2).

Stephanie’s response adds a layer of complexity to understanding how interns understood their role in discussions of literature. Specifically, we must seek to understand how and if the teacher’s role changes in culturally, socially, or racially diverse classrooms, particularly when the teacher comes from a different background. For Stephanie, at least part of her decision to stay out of discussions was driven by her lack of knowledge or experience with her students, at least in discussions early in the semester. The opposite was true for Alexis. That is, although she believed teachers should participate as little as possible in discussions of literature, her beliefs about the behaviors and capabilities of students in diverse urban schools led her to get and stay involved. She explained, “I thought, with those type of students, how can I even have a discussion? You know, they won’t even sit in their seats! They can’t even be quiet long enough to listen to my questions, let alone listen to a classmate without telling them to ‘shut-up!’”

Interestingly, Alexis attended middle and high school in the very same school and district. In addition, she came from single parent, working-class family. Combined, these experiences enabled her to empathize and understand her students more deeply than her peers. At the same time, these experiences may have closed down her beliefs about what is possible in diverse urban schools. She noted, “I think the kids have a lot to offer, but they’re often given up on, so it’s more of a challenge. I think, um, it would be really hard to do those new teaching methods that we have been pushed to learn at Middletown University (in urban schools) . . . student-led, where students decide what they want to learn” (Interview, 5/1/2003, p. 10). These views, I later realized, were also inspired by her own former English teacher, who talked to her about the “ghettoization” of schools, and how teachers have to “lower standards for students from lower-income families” (Interview, 5/10/03, p. 7).

Steve talked more generally about the challenges he faced in teaching in a diverse urban school. Before the English methods seminar, and even toward the end of the course, he believed that what he learned in university classrooms only marginally applied to teaching in diverse urban schools. As we watched a videotape of him lead a discussion of literature, I asked him, “How did you get to be the teacher you are in this videotaped lesson?” This was his response, to which I asked a follow-up question:

Steve: The ivory tower is where you get great ideas, but in the real world, (those ideas) are difficult to practice. So you have to modify things to fit different classrooms. Unless you have a suburban classroom where, it sort of will meet the same criteria that happens in the university. But when you come to an urban school where you have a mix of students, and student levels, which then you have

to make some modifications or go back to the drawing board and think, “Okay, how can I get this objective here, where do I start?”

Kevin: So you think the preparation you had was for a different kind of classroom and teaching than your placement classroom?

Steve: Yeah. I think what happens is, when things are modeled in a university classroom, you’re with your peers who want to learn, and who want to be there. You’re with people who are passionate about the same things you are, and with people that have done the work all the time, and so on and so on. It’s not like you have an awful discussion that goes absolutely nowhere in these classes, because everyone is there for a purpose. But then you come here (to Empire High School), and there are other reasons why students are here, so students will not always do the work, will not always do the reading (Steve Interview, pp. 5-6).

What seems significant here is not that Steve contrasts university students with students in his diverse urban classroom, but his implication that students in suburban schools are inherently more motivated than their urban school counterparts. By likening suburban students to university students, Steve seems to suggest that what we know and how we interact with others is determined more by who we are rather than what we have learned and experienced – in school or elsewhere. Although Steve never completely abandoned these beliefs, the data suggest that through interaction with his classmates around the tools and experiences of the English methods activity system, he developed a more complex understanding of his students and their experiences. He also developed a

more refined understanding of his role in planning and leading discussions of literature in diverse urban classrooms.

Achieving this level of understanding, for Steve as well as the other interns, was a long and often difficult process. Through mediation around tools of the English methods activity system, Steve and his classmates unveiled their beliefs, frustrations, and experiences. They shared their views about students, their thoughts on leading discussions, and the challenges of meeting personal and professional expectations. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, interns' conversations with each other, though at times replete with conflict and tension, played a critical role in their learning and development. Through mediation with each other over the tools of the course, including their personal beliefs, they deepened their understanding of students as well as discussions of literature. Through these conversations, interns saw the limitations of their perspectives, and eventually developed a more complex understanding of their role in leading purposeful, engaging discussions of literature that responded to the needs and experiences of their students. In each of the following three chapters, building from what I have presented in this chapter regarding interns' beliefs as conceptual tools, I investigate 1) the course literature and documents; 2) the videotaped discussions from interns' field placement classrooms; and 3) the instructor's teaching practice.

CHAPTER FOUR

TEXT AS A MEDIATING TOOL

Textual artifacts (or tools) played an important role in helping interns develop a deeper understanding of their role in leading discussions of literature, and what it means for students to participate in discussions. Two tools that seemed to play a particularly important role in the course were: 1) the course literature, which primarily consisted of articles written by scholars and researchers in English education, and 2) a discussion rubric, created jointly by interns' mentor teachers and their university instructors. Although most of the work and mediation around these artifacts took place in the first few weeks of the semester, the data suggest that interns were profoundly influenced by these early conversations throughout the semester. In this chapter, in order to illustrate how interns engaged with each other around these tools, in conjunction with their own beliefs – i.e., conceptual tools – I examine transcripts primarily from the early part of the semester.

Power of the Written Word

Published articles, written by researchers as well as practitioners, played an important role in helping interns develop clarity about their role in discussions of literature. The articles initiated conversation, prompted debate, shaped and re-shaped discussions, and pushed interns to examine and expand their beliefs about the teacher's role in discussions. Specifically, through mediation around these articles, interns developed an understanding of the relationship between open discussions and

instructional objectives. They came to recognize some limitations of discussions, and to regard them not as a panacea for teaching but as a useful strategy for achieving specific instructional goals. Interns also developed a more complicated yet clearer vision of the teacher's role in actively participating in discussions of literature – for example, when to step in and redirect, and when to remove oneself – perhaps completely – from a discussion.

Through mediation around published articles, interns also developed a deeper understanding of their role in preparing students to participate in discussions. They read articles that pushed them to think and talk about strategies for engaging reluctant speakers. Through conversation with each other around these articles, interns pushed each other to collectively expand their notion of what it means to participate in discussions of literature. They developed a broader conception of participation in ways that honored the strengths and experiences of their students. In the first section of this chapter, I describe and explain how mediation around these published articles, particularly during the first few weeks of the course, led interns to develop a deeper understanding of discussions of literature.

Rethinking the Teacher's Role

On the first day of the English methods seminar, the course instructor, Stacey, formally introduced open discussions of literature as a central topic for the course. “This semester,” she began, “we are going to examine discussions of literature from a variety of perspectives. In addition, each of you is going to design and conduct research around some aspect of an open discussion in your field placement classrooms” (Transcript,

1/15/03). She went on to explain more about these research projects, and spent most of this first class period having students share their thoughts and beliefs about discussions of literature – what they looked like, their experiences with them, etc. At one point, a student asked, “What do people (in the class) or you (Stacey) mean when they say ‘open discussions’”? Stacey responded:

Open discussion is when, um, to ground it in the article, Sorenson (the teacher and author of the article) sits away from the class, they’re in a circle, and she just keeps track of participation . . . she interjects as little as possible, preferably not at all . . . and the students generate everything, but most of the article is about how she prepares them to do that. There is a lot of teaching and building that goes into that. (Class Transcript, page 1).

Stacey’s definition, drawn almost entirely from an article by Sorenson¹⁸ (1993) that appeared in *English Journal*, strongly resonated with what Alexis, Stephanie, and Matt already believed about discussions – where the teacher participates as little as possible. But her remarks seemed to have a powerful impact on the other interns as well. In their placement classrooms, as I will illustrate later in this chapter, interns only minimally engaged in discussions of literature early in the semester, often fighting the temptation to act otherwise. As Julia explained about her role in leading discussions of literature, “There were times when I really wanted to say something, but I couldn’t” (Interview, 5/10/03, page 2).

¹⁸ The article challenges teachers to encourage students to become more active in discussions of literature. In the article, Sorenson tells her students, “Discussion is ‘teaching each other,’ because we can learn new viewpoints and new ideas; everyone’s ideas about literature can be valued because there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ opinions” (p. 44). Sorenson also explains that she will “sit at a student desk in the back of the room and not contribute or ask questions unless (she) finds it absolutely necessary to clarify a point” (p. 44).

Julia's response reflects what Engestrom refers to as conflict between the internalized (or intended) and externalized (or unintended) meanings of a cultural tool. The intended meaning was to encourage more open, engaging discussions of literature. The externalized, or unintended meaning, at least for Julia, was to remain silent during discussions, no matter what happened. In what follows, I will show how these and other internalized and externalized meanings of course articles confronted each other in the English methods activity system. I will show how the tension and conflict that emerged from and through these confrontations, in conjunction with interns' prior beliefs, contributed to the development and transformation of the interns, individually as well as collectively (Engestrom, 1999b). I begin with a discussion of Kathy, an intern who seemed particularly intrigued by the Sorenson article.

Shortly after Stacey shared her definition of an open discussion, Kathy remarked and then inquired, "But Sorenson gives us all this preparation, and then shows us this beautiful end product (an engaging, student-led discussion). So how do you meet those two? I want to see how her, what her first open discussion was like after she gave them all the preparation in one day that led into the discussion" (Class Transcript, page 2). In raising these issues, Kathy, rather unintentionally, encourages her classmates to consider what's not emphasized in the article – namely, the days and weeks Sorenson and her students must have worked in order to get to a place where students can ask thoughtful questions and respond to each other. In my interview with Kathy at the end of the semester, she talked about the overall impact of this and other articles on her learning. Following is an excerpt from that interview:

Kevin: When you plan for a discussion today, how is that different, how are you different, if at all, than from the start of the semester?

Kathy: Gosh, um . . . I think the biggest thing is that I was always trying to control what was coming out of the students' mouths, and now I just want to hear what they have to say.

Kevin: Okay, and what do you think caused, or prompted, that change? Was there anything in particular?

Kathy: Um I think one thing was stuff we read . . . it says right in the literature, how some people believe you should step out at times, and at other times to step back in and push further . . . (Interview, page 3)

Thus, for Kathy, who initially believed the teacher should play an active role in leading discussions of literature, the course articles offered an alternate perspective. It challenged her belief that teachers play a specific, engaged role in discussions. But as the excerpt below – from the meeting of the English methods seminar – suggests, Kathy's learning, as well as that of her classmates, was neither linear nor straightforward. Nor was it free from tension or conflict. Rather, conversations about the teacher's role were variable and irregular, and reflected a combination of the speaker's thoughts, their classmates' ideas, and what they read in the literature. In this excerpt, the Sorenson article shapes and is shaped by a discussion about student assessment. Kathy and her classmates discuss the teacher's role in assessing student learning in open discussions of literature, particularly given the unpredictable nature and content of discussions. For

purposes of analysis and clarity, since this is a rather lengthy¹⁹ excerpt, I explicate and explain along the way. I begin with Danielle, who poses a question that genuinely puzzles her:

Danielle: How can you truly assess an open discussion?

Austin: A discussion is different for each person who takes part in that discussion. Different people will create meaning in their own ways so you have to assess in ways that will honor and respect those differences.

Stacey: I think this is a good discussion right now, because when it comes to writing your own question, you're going to have to go through this process.

Danielle's question, which springs from the Sorenson article, moves the discussion away from Stacey's objective – to develop a sample research question – and toward an issue about which Danielle, and apparently Austin, grapples. Her question connects to the larger motive (Leont'ev, 1981) of the English methods activity system, which is to understand the teacher's role in leading discussions of literature. Clearly, Danielle's concerns about assessment are linked to this broader motive. As we discover later in this excerpt, the move away from Stacey's agenda led to additional conflict and tension that further deepened interns' understanding of discussions and their role in leading them.

Austin identifies a second point of conflict – namely, the intersection between student assessment as an intellectual issue and student assessment as a practical issue (Engestrom). Intellectually speaking, Austin notes that teachers must “honor and respect”

¹⁹ Understanding development from an activity system perspective necessitates that we look at data over time. Consequently, most excerpts in this and other chapters are rather lengthy. Further, they are internally truncated only when contributions seem clearly unrelated and immaterial to the mediating artifact.

students' multiple and competing interpretations of literature. From a practical point of view, however, this is not an easy task. Emily, invoking Sorenson, picks up on this latter perspective, prompting Julia to inquire about the relationship between open discussions of literature and instructional objectives:

Emily: I think the problem is that, you know, we have these objectives that are so set, and you put them on the board and they have to be completed by the end of the day, very specific . . . but we need to think about encouraging our students to be insightful, you know. Are questions being asked, are they raising interesting ideas? And as far as assessment of those objectives is concerned, I went down my list of what I wanted to happen, and I thought about some of the ideas in the Sorenson article, and I thought about different ways to assess students' insight. So for example, in my case, I jotted down some of the ideas and insights that students shared, which mean that for each class, the essay exam two weeks later might look very different from the others. In other words, I was trying to assess how insightful they were.

Julia: I guess when I think about objectives, I am wondering whether if you have specific objectives which you would like to achieve, in terms of what you want students to learn, maybe you shouldn't be having a discussion. Or, are we talking about the objectives *for* a discussion? Do you see what I am asking?

Gena: Maybe your objective is to create an open community.

Julia: But that's what I'm asking. But if your objective is for them to *learn* something, then maybe an open discussion is not what you should be leading?

While the goal of Emily's action is specific to her particular needs (to "assess students' insight" in her classroom), she contributes significantly to the broader activity system. Her remarks stir Julia to move closer toward the heart of this issue – namely the teacher's purpose for having and leading a discussion of literature. The interaction between Emily and Julia exemplifies a moment of conflict where "two worlds meet" to create new, unimagined third worlds or possibilities (Leont'ev, 1978). In this case, the new, unimagined world is a conception of discussions that, up to this point, had not been considered by the interns. In this new conception, the teacher's role is governed by his or her *purpose* rather than teaching strategy. In other words, the teacher leads a discussion of literature because it will achieve what he or she wants to accomplish, rather than the other way around. As the discussion continues, it appears some interns, like Jason, are not yet ready to embrace this conception.

Jason: Do you feel like everyone is saying you cannot use a discussion if you have specific instructional objectives? I mean, because everyone is going to arrive at a different understanding of, for example, friendship, or whatever you're talking about. So you can't necessarily assess students on set criteria because everyone's at a different spot, do you know what I mean?

Kathy: Well, but Sorenson says exactly that, in her article. She says that she tells her students that they can use facts and other information to support their opinions, but everything needs to be opinions. So she offers a way for teachers to assess students, and to get them to move toward larger, collective ideas.

Jan: I think what Jason is talking about goes back to something we talked about last year, in one of the articles that I read anyways. Um, what you're describing is

more recitation, and did they get the facts right from the story. It sounds like what we're talking about here is moving toward higher-order questions, and that's what a discussion is supposed to do. And this one author of an article I read sounds very much like Rosenblatt, that meaning is made between the reader and the content, and in the event of conversation with others, constantly negotiating meaning in a group with others.

Jason's concern is a practical one, and does not in itself deepen understanding. But from an activity system perspective, his contribution is essential to collective learning. As Engestrom (2000) points out, development "is not just the more competent pulling up the less competent. It is also a question of entirely different worlds meeting" (p. 8-9). In this case, Jason's world meets with Julia's world, and then returns to the Sorenson article through Kathy. In this way, and throughout the discussion, the course literature serves as a mediating tool or artifact.

Jan's contribution is significant because it highlights – for the class as well as for the reader here – that development is neither linear nor vertical. She points out that Jason's ideas come from articles from last year, and then she makes the important distinction between recitation and discussion. She notes, "It sounds like what we're talking about here is moving toward higher-order questions, and that's what a discussion is supposed to do" (Transcript). She then invites another scholar (who "sounds very much like Rosenblatt") into the conversation, which fosters further mediation and understanding. Stacey's contribution, which follows Jan, illustrates how two basic

processes – internalization and externalization – operate continuously at every level of human activity.

Stacey: Okay, this is an open discussion we are having right now, and I'm gonna step in because I do have an objective and we are going to meet it. So, you're all asking really great questions that you could all look at, but I want us to nail down a question as a group.

Julia: How 'bout this: "When is it appropriate to use an open discussion to meet daily or unit objectives?"

Emily: She's got a really good point. You know how we're trying all of these things that the teacher education program (at Middletown University) suggests, and a lot of the time it doesn't end up helping. I mean, you could have just stood up at the board and made it a lecture day. It's okay, sometimes it's okay to have a lecture. But instead, I tried this discussion and it would have been better to have a lecture day. I didn't meet my objectives, and so yeah, I think that's a really good question.

Alexis: I think what we're looking at is that an open discussion has its own set of objectives. The purpose of an open discussion is a whole different purpose than a lecture or recitation. It has its own set of objectives. So perhaps we can look at the objectives of an open discussion such as getting students to interact with each other, or supporting their opinions, and you could go right down the line with Sorenson. It's kind of a simple question, but she answers it.

Stacey reminds her class that the purpose of their discussion was to understand what it means to develop a research question. In the context of the lesson and course, her reminder reflects the internalized meaning of this particular cultural tool. But as the above two pages suggest, the externalized meaning takes precedence for the interns. Through mediation around the Sorenson article, interns challenge their own and others' beliefs about the teacher's role in discussions of literature. They began to see the relationship between open discussions and instructional objectives as an intellectual issue *as well as* a practical issue, rather than one or the other. They developed a deeper understanding of instructional purpose, and its relation to teaching objectives. In sum, through mediation and "re-mediation" (Leont'ev, 1978) with each other around course articles, interns create and develop new possibilities and understandings about the teacher's role in discussions.

My interviews with interns at the end of the semester illustrate some of the ways in which conversations with their peers around published articles expanded their understanding of discussions. For example, when I asked Steve to talk about his views on leading discussions of literature, he responded:

When I plan a discussion, I . . . think of a few questions in relation to the main theme or objective of what I want them to learn . . . I think, "How can I help them to be successful for the project or test, or for what they need? What's the main theme here?" Then I develop a few questions and then go and implement it. And from there, I just, well, go ahead and free-ball it, because you can't really say, "Five minutes here, five minutes there" . . . you can't always fully plan them because sometimes, discussions just, sort of, happen (Steve Interview, p. 7).

While some might categorize Steve's response as vague or uncertain, it nonetheless reflects a degree of complexity that was not apparent when Steve talked about discussions earlier in the semester. At the start of the English methods seminar, his understanding of the relationship between discussions and lesson objectives was relatively simplistic: "I thought I had to lay down the rules of a discussion, and that would allow us to get to whatever objective I had set" (Steve Interview, p. 1). In his response above, Steve talks about objectives almost as moving targets, as goals that teachers have to constantly adjust in relation to what is happening in front of them. Later during our interview, he added, "Both (teachers and students) are responsible for what goes on during a discussion. I mean (the teacher) really has to take a step forward and (the students) have to take a step forward to meet (the teacher)."

Although we cannot solely attribute Steve's changed beliefs to discussions he had with his classmates around published articles, some relationship certainly exists. The same is likely true for Emily, who explained, "Probably the most profound thing I learned in the English methods seminar was my role, my part in discussions. Not just doing it because it is a new educational fad, but doing it with a purpose. Our discussions made me question my motives for doing discussions" (Emily Interview, p. 3). In Steve's case as well as Emily's, the words used to talk about objectives and purposes of discussions parallel words their classmates used in conversations throughout the semester.

Underlying their explanations is a clear sense that they have moved away from thinking about discussions as an isolated teaching strategy, to a pedagogical tool for specific purposes that is often highly unpredictable. As I argue in the following section, published articles – among other tools – were at the center of this conceptual change in thinking.

Published Articles as Tools for Change

Course literature, in the form of published articles, played an ambiguous role in expanding interns' understanding of the teacher's role in discussions. In fact, not all interns believed they learned much through the course literature. One of them, Julia, said to me in our interview, "I don't feel that the English methods seminar helped me as much because everyone, everyone did a discussion in a different way, and so the readings we did, some things just didn't apply . . . so you're left to try things out, and if they don't work, scrap them and try something different" (Julia interview, 5/10/03, page 2). Matt shared a similar view when I asked him which course experiences most influenced his growth and development. He responded, "Mainly the cooperation I've had from others (in the class). Very little came from the literature . . . it was more the conversations, especially with Austin and Steve²⁰" (Matt Interview, page 4).

From a traditional view of development (for example, Piaget), or even a Vygotskian perspective, one can appreciate Julia and Matt's beliefs since their learning, and that of their peers, was neither linear nor additive. In other words, what they read in the literature was neither directly nor immediately applicable to their field placement classrooms. As Steve noted, "At times, the discussion would go off onto a tangent" (Steve interview, 5/2/03, page 4). But as Engestrom (1999; 2004) and other activity theorists (i.e., Leont'ev, 1978; Wertsch, 2002) point out, development is not only a process where knowledge is gained, but also destruction of old beliefs "without patronizing and reducing them to safe formulas at the outset" (Engestrom, 2000, p. 4).

Not once during my observations of the English methods activity system did I see or hear interns' beliefs reduced to "safe formulas." Rather, as the class transcript in the

²⁰ Steve, Austin, and Matt all did their teaching internship at Empire High School.

above section suggests, interns listened carefully considered their classmate's perspectives as they sought to make sense of the teacher's role in discussions. The literature served a critical role in this process. It allowed them to engage in substantive conversations about discussions and the teacher's role in leading them, which ultimately led them develop a much deeper understanding of these and related issues. As Alexis said during our interview, "I think the course helped me to define what a discussion is, what a discussion looks like, and, um, the different attributes of a discussion" (Alexis interview, 5/1/03, page 2). Similarly, Emily explained that, "Prior to the English methods seminar, my idea of discussion was recitation . . . I was thinking I was leading a discussion but all along it was really recitation" (Emily interview, 5/6/03, page 1).

Emily's final remarks in the above excerpt allude to an important source of productive tension: the highly regarded teacher education program at Middletown University. Emily says, "We're trying all of these things that the program suggests, and a lot of the time it doesn't end up helping. I mean, you could have just stood up at the board and made it a lecture day . . . but instead, I tried this discussion" (Class transcript, p. 6). Her frustrations highlight two important and related issues: first, the challenge of enacting teaching strategies endorsed by a top-rated teacher education program; and second, the apparent lack of connection between strategy (in this case discussion) and purpose ("I tried discussion and it would have been better to have a lecture day").

Combined, these issues remind us that in order to fully understand any activity system, we must consider its historical and cultural context. The teacher education program at Middletown University is a nationally recognized program, and interns in the program are very aware of this status. In fact, they often make use of this reputation when

applying for teaching positions. The danger, as Emily's remarks suggest, is that interns may not see the forest for the trees. In other words, they may believe that because the teacher program "suggests" certain teaching strategies, in this case discussions, these methods and strategies should be used above all others, irrespective of purpose. But significantly, because this notion does not appear to align with Emily's or the other interns' beliefs, it creates a healthy and productive tension that leads to new learning and discovery.

Alexis is the first to pick up on this tension and introduces a new concept – purpose – into the conversation. Through mediation around this article, with only minimal input from the teacher, Alexis and her classmates begin to move toward understanding that pedagogy cannot be determined absent a discussion of purpose. And while Alexis' comments do not suggest that she and her classmates have necessarily or fully embraced and understand this relationship, they do suggest the doors are open for further mediation and learning. In Chapters Five and Six, which examine tools that were introduced and explored later in the semester, interns expand upon this and other aspects of discussions. In this way, mediation around articles early in the semester served as an incubator of ideas that, over time, deepened interns' understanding of their role in leading discussions.

Expanding Strategies for and Conceptions of Participation

In addition to providing opportunities for interns to think and talk about when and how to lead discussions of literature, mediation around published articles expanded interns' ideas about student participation during discussions of literature. Through

conversations with their peers around these articles, interns developed novel strategies for encouraging students to participate during discussions. Perhaps more importantly, interns began to think in broader terms about the meaning of participation. Whereas at the start of the semester they thought of participation as a verbal process, by the end of the course they expanded their definition of participation to include cognitive as well as written processes. That is, they began to realize that speaking was not the only way to measure participation in discussions. Moreover, they discovered that just because students spoke *during* discussions did not mean they were participating *in* a particular discussion. In the following paragraphs, drawing primarily on interview data, I explain how mediation around course articles led interns to these and other insights about student participation in discussions.

Encouraging students to verbally participate in discussions – of literature or otherwise – can be a challenging task, particularly for beginning teachers. Oddly, at least at the beginning of the semester, very few of the interns I interviewed seemed to feel this way. Most believed students would readily and eagerly speak out during discussions of literature. As Kathy explained, “I thought I could just plop down the rules . . . and my students would just run away with (the discussion)” (Kathy Interview, page 3).

While articles such as the one by Sorenson may have contributed to these notions, my interviews with interns at the end of the semester revealed that published pieces – including the one by Sorenson – ultimately expanded interns’ notions of participation. As Matt explained:

I want (my students) to participate, but . . . I read an interesting article for (class)
– I forgot the name of it – but it said that non-participation does not insinuate that

students are disengaged from what's going on. It could be a mix of other things – it could be a thinking process, it could be assimilation issues, forming his/her own opinions, etc. So . . . ideally, I would like everyone to participate, but I don't think I should expect them to because some kids might not be as able to form their ideas and opinions as quickly as others, or they might not be as outgoing. I mean, they're teenagers and so I don't expect them to jump out of their shell that quickly (Matt Interview, pp. 2-3).

On its surface, Matt's remarks suggest that the article he read, by itself, led him to realize that he held a rather narrow conception of participation. But further examination of interview data as well as transcripts from the English methods seminar suggests that much of what Matt learned was filtered through his classmates. Later during our interview, when I asked him to speak more about what and how he learned during the semester, and where he developed his ideas about getting students to participate, he said, "Most came from my colleagues, even when it started from the literature, because they were the ones, through conversations, that helped me make sense of what, like Smagorinsky, was talking about" (Matt Interview, p. 4). Matt went on to say that most of his conversations were with Austin and Steve, since all three taught in the same school. He explained, "Most of what we talked about was about stuff that happened in our classrooms, but some centered on things that happened in (the English methods seminar)" (Matt Interview, p. 4).

From an activity perspective, Matt's final comment above reveals a critical feature of intern learning – namely, that understanding was enhanced as ideas crossed

over and between the many boundaries within the English methods activity system. In other words, for Matt, reading articles about student participation became real when he was able to talk about the article with his peers. It made sense to him when he was able to talk and listen to his colleagues, particularly those who taught in a context similar to his own. In this sense, the value of the field placement becomes apparent, as a setting where ideas and strategies shape and are shaped by the prospective teacher. Drawing on what Matt knows about his field placement classroom, and what he learns from his peers, he is able to make sense of – and perhaps internalize – ideas he reads about in published articles and other documents. This relationship between the literature, classmates, and the field placement classroom, captures the underlying premise and principles of a functional activity system.

Alexis and Stephanie, similar to Matt, broadened their conception of participation as a result of the English methods activity system. In my interview with Alexis, I asked, “How, if at all, has the English methods seminar influenced your beliefs about student participation during discussions?” She responded:

I think . . . about the silent people in the classroom, and how to get them to participate, so the articles we read were valuable. I thought, um, I can’t remember the authors, but I think you can participate without speaking, because my students *did* participate – their heads turned, they weren’t just staring at the ceiling, they were moving their heads toward the direction of the speaker. But it’s hard to keep track of that. And I think those readings were helpful” (Alexis Interview, p. 6).

Alexis' response suggests that the articles she read for class helped to expand her definition of student participation. Although she, like Matt, seems to favor verbal participation ("how to get my students to participate"), she also seems to have learned that students can – and do – participate in numerous other ways, including paying attention in class and facing others when they are speaking in class. Stephanie shared a similar response when I asked her to talk about her thoughts on participation in class discussions, which happened to be her research question for the semester. She explained:

(In the beginning) I really wanted everyone to participate. But when they did not, I realized it was probably that students had reasons, so I came up with another way for students to get participation points, which was to write up their ideas. I decided this was an acceptable way to participate, as long as students are listening . . . (so) my perception has changed, from thinking that everyone has to participate to thinking that as long as students can formulate their ideas, they are still participating (Stephanie Interview, p. 1-2).

Thus, for Stephanie, Alexis, and Matt, ideas about what it means to participate in discussions changed rather dramatically over the course of their semester in the English methods seminar. Through mediation with each other around published articles, and through reading and thinking about ideas presented in these articles in the context of their field placement classrooms, interns complicated their beliefs about participation. Although the impetus for this change in thinking was an article or series of articles, it was through conversations with their classmates, instructor, and mentor teachers that enabled them to understand and embrace these broader conceptions. As the below transcript

excerpt from the seminar suggests, interns made connections between what they read in the articles, what they experienced in their field placement classrooms, and what they learned from each other in order to make sense of new or unfamiliar ideas. In this excerpt, students are commenting on Stephanie's videotaped discussion, where only a few students actually participated verbally.

Alexis: Seems like most of the students were at least listening, and that's the most important thing. I can't even get students to listen. But your students were at least looking at the speaker and listening, so that's important. Do you give points for participation?

Stephanie: I do. Well, it's not really points, but they know they have to say something at least once to get credit.

Julia: You asked about the quiet students in the class, and it seemed like some were talking more than others, but at one point a student said something like, "Let's hear from the quiet side of the classroom," so it seems like students do a good job of monitoring themselves.

Maggie: I was gonna say something similar, which relates to something I was reading in the Townsend article about "silent voices," which is that, I'm beginning to think that maybe it's not essential that all kids talk. I mean some of my students just aren't used to talking in large groups, but they can still get stuff up here (points to her head) and learn from the discussion. And the thing is that some of the dominant students sometimes make that even harder, because they don't have any problem talking in front of others, it just comes so naturally. But I think small groups ahead of time allows all students to participate, so you're

getting them there, plus on paper, plus they're paying attention, so you're getting from them a lot more than you think you are.

Penelope: Um, you said you did small groups beforehand, and maybe you could also do a free-write because in small groups, my students often look to one student to take the lead, whereas in free-writes, or a writing prompt related to your objective, students would have something to say that they already thought about.

From an activity perspective, the above transcript is compelling for several different reasons. The first is the way in which one student, Alexis, drawing on a wide range of experiences, creates space for her classmates to offer alternatives to the traditional meaning of participation. She opens the conversation with, "Your students were at least looking at the speaker and listening, so that's important." We know from interview data that, even though she does not mention them here by name, at least some of Alexis' ideas came from articles she read in the past. But in starting the conversation this way, Alexis encourages three of her classmates – Julia, Maggie, and Penelope – to offer specific ways in which teachers might alternatively define and enact participation in discussions. In this way, the English methods activity system was one in which ideas are generated from and through negotiation of course artifacts, in this case published articles.

The second reason deals with the permeability of boundaries across the various settings of this activity system. In the above excerpt, four of the five interns referenced their own placement classrooms in commenting on student participation. Alexis says she, "Can't even get students to listen," to which Stephanie responds that she gives students points for participation. Later, Maggie invokes not only an article she read for the course,

but her own placement classroom where “some of (her) students just aren’t used to talking in large groups, but they can still get stuff up here (points to her head) and learn from the discussion.” Finally, Penelope, who is not an active participant in discussions, adds that “(her) students often look to one student to take the lead.” From an activity theory perspective, these contributions are significant because they illustrate how interns’ interactions and experiences in one setting cross over and through others, including the English methods seminar. Said differently, learning happens through and across multiple settings, and not something that takes place as an isolated event in a distinct setting. Without the opportunity to think about and draw from their unique and multiple placement settings, interns would have taken very little from the discussion about participation in the seminar.

And finally, from an activity perspective, the above excerpt is compelling because of the way in which text, in this case the Townsend article, is brought into the discussion. With no prompting from the course instructor, Maggie links her understanding of the Townsend (1998) article to Julia’s point about students who do not say much during discussions. Maggie says, “I was gonna say something similar, which relates to something I was reading in the Townsend article . . .” By connecting what her classmates say to the literature, Maggie validates the literature, elevates its status in the eyes of her classmates. In doing this, Maggie opens a line of dialogue around different ways of engaging students, or at least folding “quiet students” ideas into discussions. This conversation illustrates quite profoundly how the course literature served as a mediating tool for interns that ultimately helped them to both complicate and clarify their role in facilitating discussions of literature.

In my interviews with interns at the end of the semester, they talked about participation in ways that suggested they had incorporated ideas raised during discussions in the English methods seminar into their beliefs and schemata. In many cases, these beliefs sharply contrasted with their initial beliefs. For example, as Stephanie explained:

In the beginning, I wanted students to participate; that was very important to me. But when they did not, I realized that . . . I had to come up with other ways for them to get participation points, so I had them write up their thoughts and ideas. I guess I learned that this was an acceptable way to participate, as long as students were listening . . . (So) my perception has changed, from thinking that everyone has to participate to thinking that as long as students can formulate their ideas, they are still participating (Stephanie Interview, pp. 1-2).

Although the transcribed excerpt above took place nearly one month before my interview with Stephanie, we see in her response numerous links to her classmates' ideas. Here, Stephanie talks about participation in broad terms, as paying attention to each other, as listening, and as having students "write up their thoughts and ideas." What seems significant here is not only that Stephanie expanded her definition of participation ("I thought that students had to speak in order to participate," Stephanie Interview, p. 6), but also how conversations with her peers, around articles by Townsend and others, inspired her learning. In this way, in addition to those described earlier, published articles in the English methods seminar served a central role in expanding, complicating, as well as clarifying for interns what it means to participate in discussions.

In sum, through mediation around articles distributed and read for the English methods seminar, interns developed a more complete understanding of the teacher's role in discussions. They deepened their knowledge of when and how to step into or out of discussions, broadened their conception of participation in discussions, and developed alternative strategies to engage students in discussions of literature. As I will illustrate in Chapter Five, these discussions were further facilitated by interns' videotaped discussions, which allowed interns the opportunity to "bring" their field placement experiences into the English methods seminar setting. And as the following section will attest, published articles were not the only textual tools that promoted intern growth through mediation. A discussion rubric, created jointly by interns' mentor teachers and their university instructors, also played an important role in their development.

That's What the Rubric Says

The "Discussion Rubric for English Interns" (2002, see Appendix A) played an important developmental role in the English methods activity system. The rubric, developed by members of the English Educators Network²¹ (EEN), was created and intended to help student teachers – as well as their mentors – understand what a discussion looks like and how it should be implemented. It also served to present a unified vision of discussions to English teacher interns, one jointly developed by their university instructors and mentor teachers. While the document at least partially achieved these purposes, it served another important role: Through mediation with each other around the rubric, interns learned more about when to step in and out of discussions, and

²¹ A collective of university instructors and English mentor teachers from local middle and high schools.

began to understand when and how it may become necessary to prepare students to participate in discussions of literature.

Stepping In and Out of Discussions

Although Stacey did not formally introduce the discussion rubric to her students until the second class meeting, interns were aware of it from the start of the semester through their mentor teachers. Danielle was the first to explicitly make reference to the document. In the one of the first meetings of the English methods seminar, while talking about the research project, she said, “They’re giving us a rubric for what they think is a good discussion . . . when truly, honestly, I mean there are parts of it that I don’t agree with . . . For instance their participation suggests that I should have this many students participating to be effective and I don’t . . . I can’t . . . I just . . .” (Class transcript).

Unlike Emily, who was subtle in her rejection of certain aspects of the teacher education program, Danielle was quite explicit. Her use of “they” and “their” as monikers for the teacher education program reflects the complex and often strained relationship between teacher preparation programs and the students who enroll in them. At the heart of this dynamic is a widespread belief among pre-service teachers that formal training is a mere formality; most believe they know all about teaching even before entering formal teacher education programs (Lortie, Wilson, etc.). This tension was important not only because of its socio-historical significance to the English methods activity system, but also because it accompanied the discussion rubric’s introduction into the conversation.

During the second class meeting, Stacey showed interns a videotape of a veteran teacher leading what Stacey calls an open discussion of literature. Her goal in the lesson

was to help interns learn to use the rubric to assess and learn from a discussion. Specifically, she asked interns to break into five groups and, using specific criteria from the “Questions and Responses” section of the rubric, to comment on the discussion. She asked them to use the “Exceeds Expectations” column as a guide. In a sense, this process represented the *internalized* meaning or intent of the lesson. But as the conversation moved forward, as interns mediated around this artifact, the discussion gravitated toward a more important issue for the interns: their role in discussions of literature – the *externalized* meaning. In the rather lengthy excerpt that follows, I begin with Carly, who explained what she and her group learned by observing the first criterion – the levels of the discussion questions.²²

Carly: The only two questions (the teacher in the videotape) asked were (inaudible). So we noticed that, although she may have had goals, when something wasn’t working, she moved on to something else.

Scott: Her questions were very open, indicating that she was trying very hard to get students to ask their own questions.

Carly: But I don’t think she should ever completely step out, because there were times when they were off on a tangent, and if she had just come back and asked how these things are connected, it would have brought the students right back to the focus objectives . . . so I guess I wonder whether this rubric is specifically for an open discussion. Because under “Exceeds Expectations,” it reads, “Teacher and students respond to each others’ responses,” which means that a teacher

²² Carly and her group looked at the criterion: “Discussion questions include multiple levels of questions, discussion of genre, style, and aesthetics, and are effectively ordered to scaffold students’ learning and to meet lesson objectives.

would never completely step out of an open discussion. So I don't think to have an open discussion she has to completely not be there.

Stacey: Okay, I want you to hold that thought, because we will come back to that, because I think there are readings that will help you to think about that very question. What was the next category?

Although Carly and Scott were asked to examine the “level” of discussion questions – whether they were exclusively comprehension level and/or whether they included higher-order thinking questions – Carly quickly moved to talking about the teacher's role. In the videotaped discussion, the teacher participates very little, which seemed problematic for Carly. She says, “If she had just . . . asked how things are connected, it would have brought the students right back to the focus objectives” (Transcript). In fact, almost to bolster her argument, she reads from a different criterion on the discussion rubric, leading her to question whether or not the discussion rubric should even be applied to open discussions.

In this way, talking about the discussion rubric engendered a substantive conversation about when and how the teacher should step in to redirect open discussions. Interns and their instructor explore terminology within the discussion rubric – for example the meaning of “exceeds expectations” – and talk about its meaning in the context of an actual videotaped discussion. Carly concludes, “I don't think to have an open discussion (the teacher) has to completely not be there.” Thus, through mediation around this textual artifact with her classmates and instructor, Carly comes to new realizations about the teacher's role in discussions.

Stacey, apparently aware that Carly's concerns could move the discussion away from her intended objectives, asks Carly to "hold that thought" until later. But through mediation around this tool, the discussion rubric, the seed for further exploration has been planted. In the excerpted portion below, interns as well as the instructor seem to rush through the task in order to get to the more pressing concern of the teacher's role, and how much the teacher should or should not participate in discussions of literature. And because, as noted in the previous section of this chapter, interns are divided on this issue, the associated tension is the "motive force of change and development" (Leont'ev, 1978, p. 9). Stacey continues by asking the next group to report on what they learned:

Jan: In terms of questions, most of them were lower-level questions, which suggests to me that students cannot ask the kinds of questions needed to achieve these learning objectives. One young woman asked, "What did you guys think about the butler (in the story)" and that was the closest thing to a higher-order question that we saw.²³

Stacey: And the next category?²⁴

Jessica: Seemed like students backed their responses up with textual evidence. And in terms of the learning objectives, I think a combination of personal experience and textual evidence is necessary to achieve these learning objectives.

Anne: The students seemed to use the text more for surface features, rather than to deeply explore what is happening in the story.

Stacey: And the next group?²⁵

²³ Jan's response was with respect to the criterion, "Discussion questions are both textual and student-centered, with clear connections between them and to lesson purposes" (Discussion rubric).

²⁴ The criterion reads, "The balance of student and teacher-generated questions support purpose (Discussion rubric).

Julian: They didn't make any specific textual references, although there are some surface references, which suggest they are using it to answer their questions.

Stacey: And the last one, students building on each other's points?²⁶

Brad: I thought there were definitely examples where they did build on students ideas, but it lacked some coherence.

Alex: We also talked about the fact that the conversation did not seem to really *go* anywhere; it was really all over the place. We also looked at when and how the teacher did step in, and how it became a recitation if she talked for too long, and whether this then changed it from an open discussion.

This sequence begins with Jan, who concludes, "Students cannot ask the kinds of questions needed to achieve these learning objectives." Although her task was to observe rather than judge, Jan comments on what seems to her an inability on the part of students to pose higher-order thinking questions. As we will see later in this excerpt, her comment leads others to think about and discuss what it means to prepare students to participate in discussions. In this way, the discussion rubric served to stimulate discussion around an issue that was not, for whatever reason, discussed earlier.

Stacey moves the conversation forward, asking each group to report on what they observed in the videotape from their various perspectives. In turn, representatives from each group share what they learned. The final group, comprised three students including

²⁵ The criterion reads, "Students consistently cite specific textual passages and other relevant references to support their point of view" (Discussion rubric).

²⁶ As Stacey indicates, the criterion here reads, "Teacher and students respond to each other's responses to encourage and further other responses; responses are used in follow-up discussions and writing tasks" (Discussion rubric).

Brad and Austin, viewed the discussion from the perspective of students and the teacher responding to and building on each others' comments. Brad points out that the discussion seemed to "lack coherence," to which Austin adds, "We also looked at how and when the teacher did step in, and how it became a recitation if she talked for too long, and whether this then changed it from an open discussion" (Class transcript).

As noted in Chapter 1, Austin entered the English methods seminar with the belief that teachers played significant role in discussions of literature, in moving students toward specific instructional objectives. No doubt those beliefs collided with what Austin saw on the videotape, where the teacher said very little and seemed to let her students take the discussion where they wanted to take it. Given this contrast, we are not surprised that Austin brings up the teacher's role. In the final section of this excerpt, we will see how Austin's observation, combined with Carly's earlier questions and Jan's comments about students' inability to ask higher-order questions lead to new insights into the teacher's role in discussions. First, however, Stacey makes a general statement about the value of the rubric:

Stacey: Um, I hope you can see how to use the rubric to understand a discussion. But I hope you don't use it to conclude that your discussions are good or bad, but that you learn things from them by using the rubric as a lens to see the discussion. So for example, in this case, you could see that students need some help in learning how to provide textual support and evidence. So it is better to ask yourself, "What can I learn from this?" as a formative thing, rather than as an evaluative thing, even though at times our conversations in this class take on that tone of evaluation. Scott, did you have a question?

Scott: I'm just wondering, when it says "Exceeds Expectations," expectations of what? An idealistic discussion? Because I would be happy, as I read this document, to reach "Meets Expectations."

Stacey: I don't think there is any expectation that you will reach "Exceeds" in every discussion. This is more to be used as a tool to help you think about leading discussions with your students. Use it to understand the territory of discussions, to help you think about where you are, and where you would like to go in leading discussions. So, let's go back and think about what Carly said, which is the role of the teacher in an open discussion.

Carly: I just think that it is unrealistic for a teacher to step out and not be involved, even during an open discussion. For a teacher to step out is to say that students already know everything. And even in the rubric, teacher involvement is still a part of "Exceeds Expectations."

Here, we return to what is clearly an important issue for Carly and Austin and the rest of their classmates: how and when the teacher should participate or "step out" of discussions of literature. Carly – and no doubt Steve, Austin, Emily, Julia, and Kathy²⁷ – believes it is "unrealistic" for teachers to remove themselves from discussions of literature. As she grapples with this issue, building on what she and her classmates have already talked about in relation to the Sorenson article, she invokes the rubric as proof that *some* participation is appropriate. "Even in the rubric," she points out, "involvement is still a part of 'Exceeds Expectations.'" In this way, the rubric continues to spark

²⁷ Five interns who, as discussed earlier in the chapter, initially believed the teacher played an integral role in discussions of literature, and in moving students toward specific instructional objectives.

dialogue about the teacher's role that is charged with tension and conflict, but which ultimately leads the class talk in substantive ways about the teacher's role.

As noted earlier, the excerpts presented in this section all come from a single discussion in the English methods seminar. For purposes of analysis and discussion, I divided them into three separate segments. In looking across these segments, however, we begin to see how the discussion rubric, as an artifact of the course, played a significant role in shaping how interns understood their role in managing discussions of literature. Early in the excerpt, interns challenged the rubric's criteria for what counts as a good discussion ("There are parts of it that I don't agree with"). Later, while watching a videotaped discussion, as part of a class activity, they systematically used the rubric to think and talk about what worked and what did not in a discussion of literature. And finally, as the last excerpt above suggests, they used the rubric as support for their ideas and thoughts about discussions.

Common to all three of these segments is the way in which the rubric, as a mediating tool, provided interns and their teacher the opportunity to engage in substantive conversations about the meaning of discussions. As a tool for learning, the discussion rubric provided a context for understanding and exploring discussions from multiple points of view. It allowed students to bring their varying notions of the teacher's role in leading discussions together, and to complicate these notions in productive, thoughtful ways. In my interviews with interns at the end of the semester, they shared thoughts about the teacher's role that no doubt shaped and were shaped by mediation around this textual artifact. As Steve explained, "In terms of discussions, there are things the university wants you to do and use that don't always work, so in the classroom you

sort of stretch things in order to get to the end goal in discussions” (Steve Interview, p. 13).

As noted earlier in this section, interns regarded the discussion rubric as the long (and often oppressive) arm of the ivory tower (recall: “They’re giving us a rubric for what they think is a good discussion,” Transcript, p. 12). In making the above statement, Steve seems to be referencing – perhaps among other things – the discussion rubric. And although he appears to see things in terms of what “works” in the classroom, he also seems committed to a more flexible, dynamic stance with respect to discussions and the teacher’s desired learning objectives. Austin talked specifically about the discussion rubric and how, through mediation with his classmates, he realized how it should be used. He explained:

In talking about the discussion rubric, I discovered that it was really focusing on one particular type of discussion . . . It also didn’t really address the type of preparation that is required, that teachers have to do with their students . . . I also realized that there are many types of involvement for teachers, and that the discussion rubric cannot possibly address them all (Steve Interview, p. 1).

Finally, as Kathy explained, “Things like the literature and rubric are important . . . because (they) help you to think about what needs to be done in specific situations” (Kathy Interview, p. 9). Given the conversations Kathy and her classmates had around the discussion rubric, and the ways in which they examined, challenged, and applied its language, it seems highly unlikely that she or her peers would have come to such insightful conclusions on their own. Thus, through mediation on and around the

discussion rubric, interns in the English methods activity system developed a deeper understanding of their role in leading and participating in discussions of literature with their students. In the following section, I examine how mediation around this textual artifact pushed interns to think about a related issue – namely, in *preparing* students to participate in discussions.

Extending Interns' Thinking

Although Stacey may have appeared to her interns to be indifferent with respect to where discussions in the seminar were headed, she was very much engaged in its direction and purpose. As Britzman (2000) has noted, often the most important decisions teachers make in the classroom are invisible to students. In the excerpt below, Stacey sees and seizes an opportunity during a discussion about the discussion rubric to expand interns' conceptions of the teacher's role. As she did numerous times throughout the semester, she cleverly asks a question that seems open and benign, but which ultimately leads her students to discover and learn new things about the teacher's role. Immediately prior to this sequence, students were talking about when and how the teacher should step into discussions of literature, particularly if they are moving further and further away from the teacher's instructional objectives. They have just watched a clip of a teacher leading a discussion, and are using the discussion rubric to evaluate her decisions and effectiveness. Stacey asks:

Stacey: So if we look at Bridges (article), he talks about some of these issues. As you think about the many roles a teacher might play, what might be the role of the

teacher in a discussion like this (in the videotape)? Are there more than one?

What are they?

Alexis: She (the teacher in the videotape) stepped in when students were having side conversations, she helped them to reshape their thinking, or refine what they were saying.

Stacey: So do people believe the teacher should stay out completely, as Carly was asking about earlier?

Carly: Well, part of that was my own experience. Like, what is good for a twelfth grade class is not necessarily good for a seventh grade class.

Stacey: So if we were to say an open discussion is one where students take control, is it possible, do you think we can say, yes, an open discussion can take place in an eighth grade classroom, an open discussion can take place in a twelfth grade classroom?

Carly: The preparation would be entirely different. I mean, in my case, if I were to have an open discussion, and I don't want to say that's impossible, otherwise, why am I here? But I would have to start in January and maybe get there in June, whereas in twelfth grade, I think I could get there faster.

Stacey: Okay, so for now, you would say that a teacher would have to stay involved in the discussion, at least where your students are right now.

Through mediation around the discussion rubric, Carly moves from thinking solely about the teacher's role in discussions to talking about other important teacher functions. Specifically, she seems to recognize that the issue is not merely when or how

the teacher intervenes, but in a much broader sense, what the teacher has done to prepare his or her students to participate in discussions of literature. In other words, questions about the teacher's role must be considered in relation to myriad other factors including the age and experience of students, what the teacher has done to prepare students, and the teacher's instructional objectives. Although Stacey plays an important role in deepening Carly's understanding, the context is made possible through mediation around the discussion rubric.

Although the discussion rubric is not specifically mentioned in the above sequence, it plays a significant role in this conversation. As noted in the preceding section, Stacey instructed interns to use the discussion rubric to assess a videotaped discussion. They watched a teacher lead a discussion of literature with her students, and then used various criteria from the rubric to talk about her strategies and methods of instruction. In this way, the rubric served as a very important mediating tool. It provided the context for Stacey to ask the questions she did, and for interns to realize that what happens in discussions is very much related to what teachers do to *prepare* students to participate in discussions. Perhaps more importantly, this realization comes not from the teacher, but from Carly, who thinks about her own experiences in relation to the teacher in the videotaped discussion.

I should point out that by mediation I do not mean solely the exchange between Stacey and Carly. Rather, mediation around the discussion rubric began with Danielle's conflict-laden remarks about the rubric, and continued through the excerpt presented above. Development, as defined by activity theory, is not a linear process that happens in predictable, progressive, and timely steps. Rather, it is an overlapping and dynamic

process, where ideas are carried through and across multiple settings, tools, and contexts. A good example of this appears above, when Stacey refers to an article by Bridges to help Carly and her classmates think about the teacher's role in discussions. While it is difficult if not impossible to measure the specific impact of this article or the discussion rubric on interns' learning, it no doubt plays a role in their mediation and development. Further, as Leont'ev and others point out, meaningful mediation is possible only when accompanied by conflict and tension – in this case resulting from contrasting beliefs about the teacher's role in discussions. When interns' beliefs are challenged – by the teacher education program, by other interns' beliefs, by what they see and hear in videotaped discussions – they experience tension that, if properly harnessed and engaged, is productive and can lead to new insights.

Preparing Students for Discussions

So, what evidence, if any, exists to illustrate whether and what interns learned about preparing students for discussions? During my interviews with interns at the end of the semester, many talked about this aspect of discussions. Several shared that, by the end of the semester, they learned that in order to effectively lead discussions of literature, teachers have to begin preparing students to participate very early in the school year. As Alexis noted:

One thing I tried to work on (with my students) was listening, so I talked a lot throughout the semester about listening and what it means to listen – looking at each other, at the speaker, when they are talking. I'm not sure how well that went,

but definitely realized this was something I should have worked on sooner (Alexis Interview, p. 2).

Matt expressed similar sentiments, and seemed to suggest that even at the end of the semester, many of his classmates didn't appear to understand what it takes. He said:

Ideally, I would like to see everyone participate, but I don't think I should expect them to because some kids might not be as able to form their own ideas and opinions as quickly as others, or they might not be as outgoing. I mean, they're teenagers and I don't expect them to jump out of their shells that quickly. That might be something you could see as a goal for them for the year, or the semester (Matt Interview, pp. 2-3).

Finally, as Austin noted, "Through (the English methods seminar), I realized that I did not spend enough invested classroom time setting up my students, preparing them to participate in a discussion. Although I thought about community building, it was not in the context of discussions" (Austin Interview, p. 1). Thus, for Alexis, Matt, and Austin, conversations with their peers around artifacts such as the discussion rubric introduced them to ideas they had not previously considered. As noted in Chapter Three, Matt believed leading discussions entailed throwing out questions to students and having them respond. Through discussions on or in the context of the discussion rubric, he and his fellow interns developed a much deeper and clearer sense of the teacher's role in preparing students and the classroom for discussions. He came to realize that it takes a lot of time and energy to think about how to best prepare students to talk openly about

literature. And that in order to facilitate productive discussions of literature, teachers need to begin preparing students early in the semester.

But starting early is not the only lesson interns learned through conversations with their instructor and classmates. As Emily noted, “The teacher is the one who sets the tone (for discussions), and then the students pick it up from there” (Emily interview, p. 7). In other words, if teachers want students to feel comfortable and encouraged to participate in discussions, they have to create the necessary conditions. Towards the end of the semester, Emily used what she learned through her placement experiences and discussions in the English methods seminar to create a graphic organizer that guided student participation during discussions. Although these were not ideas she picked up specifically from conversations with her classmates, they were ideas that came out of discussions around the teacher’s role in preparing students to participate.

Not all interns fully embraced the sentiments expressed by Matt, Alexis, Austin, and Emily regarding the preparation of students for discussions. Steve, for example, remained dubious about the teacher’s capacity to empower and prepare students to participate in discussions. In my interview with him at the end of the semester, he noted, “If you don’t have a class that knows how to handle itself well in a discussion, then recitation is by all means the best way to go with things” (Steve Interview, p. 11). Steve seems to suggest that there is only so much teachers can do in terms of leading effective and engaging discussions of literature. Some students, or some classes, may not be able to “handle” themselves. On the surface, Steve’s remarks seem to suggest that he has changed little with respect to the teacher’s role in discussions. On the other hand, Steve’s responses to other questions during our interview suggest that he has grown a tremendous

amount, despite some rather challenging experiences with students in his placement classroom.

Combined, the above data suggests that mediation around tools such as the discussion rubric opened lines of conversation that pushed interns to rethink the teacher's role in discussions. In most cases, learning seemed serendipitous, almost happenstance. In other words, what came from these discussions rarely directly followed from where they started. Through embarking on a discussion around the discussion rubric, interns came to realize that teachers should never decide ahead of time whether to "step in" or "step out" of discussions. Rather, they should assess the direction of the discussion, and act based on their instructional objectives. And rather than simply expect that students will or should participate, most interns began to understand the role they played in preparing students to participate, and in creating a comfortable classroom and stimulating classroom environment.

As noted earlier, discussions about textual artifacts were concentrated in the first few weeks of the English methods seminar. Their influence, however, extended throughout the duration of the course. In the following sections, I turn my attention to two other significant tools of the English methods activity system – the videotaped discussions and the instructor's pedagogy. As the data will illustrate, ideas that sprang from conversations about the discussion rubric and course articles shaped interns' mediation around these other tools. For example, as interns engaged with each other around the videotaped discussions, they appropriated ideas and insights from each other and earlier conversations to make sense of what they saw and heard. These discussions,

although replete with conflict and tension, led to additional insight into the teacher's role in discussions of literature.

However, before moving to these chapters, I offer the following microscopic analysis of how one intern, Austin, incorporated what he learned from and through the semester into his placement teaching. The danger of presenting Austin's case in the context of this chapter is the reader's inclination to attribute Austin's change in thinking and behavior solely to mediation around the course articles and discussion rubric. Clearly, as I have tried to communicate throughout the chapter, this is not the case. The English methods activity system constitutes a range of learning experiences and opportunities for the interns, including but not limited to the weekly seminar, the field placement classroom, and interactions with mentor teachers and fellow interns. Interns borrow and appropriate ideas from across these activity settings, and carry them into others. To attribute Austin's development to any specific experience or opportunity would not be accurate.

At the same time, close examination of what and how one intern changed during the semester seems useful and productive for understanding teacher learning. In the following section, I attempt to show how Austin used what he learned through the semester to inform his practice of leading discussions of literature, and how these lessons interacted with his field placement experiences. Although Austin's case is based on a limited number of classroom observations, it nonetheless provides understanding of the influence of mediation around specific learning artifacts – in this case, published articles and the discussion rubric.

The Case of Austin

As noted in Chapter Three, Austin began the English methods seminar with a rather fixed understanding of the teacher's role in discussions of literature. He believed, simply, that "good discussions were those where the teacher was a good storyteller, which would then bring students to open up . . . discussions were really teacher-led and teacher-focused (Interview, 5/8/2003, p. 5). At the same time, Austin was a very open-minded individual. From the very first class session, he appeared genuinely interested in learning as much as he could from the course. He asked questions, puzzled over his classmates' ideas, and seemed eager to understand perspectives that ran counter to his beliefs and convictions about teaching. In this way, Austin may have been something of an anomaly. Most research suggests that by the time candidates enter teacher education programs, they already believe they know all there is to know about teaching. Throughout my semester in the seminar, I never got this impression from Austin. But Austin was also a few years older than the typical pre-service teacher. At twenty-six years of age, he seemed to have developed a capacity to understand things from perspectives other than his own.

Given all of this, in conjunction with the emphasis in the English methods seminar on discussions of literature, I was not surprised to see Austin attempt a student-centered discussion in his field placement classroom during the first weeks of the semester. Stacey, the course instructor, had described an open discussion during the first class meeting as one where the teacher "sits away from the class . . . (and) interjects as little as possible, preferably not at all . . . the students generate everything" (Class Transcript, pp. 1-2). Austin, eager to experiment and perhaps a bit naïve, took Stacey

quite literally. As I sat in the back of his field placement classroom, just a few days after this first meeting of the seminar, I watched Austin's tenth grade students settle into their seats.

The course was American literature, and students were reading Lorraine Hansberry's (1994) *A Raisin in the Sun*. The play portrays a few weeks in the life of the Youngers, an African-American family living on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s. When the play opens, the Youngers are about to receive an insurance check for \$10,000. The money comes from the recently deceased Mr. Younger's insurance policy. Each member of the family has a different idea on what to do with the money. The matriarch of the family, Mama, eventually prevails and puts a down payment on a house in an entirely white neighborhood. When the white neighbors learn of the Youngers' plan, they do everything in their power to get the African-American family to change its mind. But the family refuses. On the day I observed, the discussion focused on issues of segregation and integration as they pertained to the play as well as contemporary society.

Austin opened the class by expressing his desire to stay out of the discussion. He explained, "I am going to stay out of the discussion, but I would like you to talk with each other." He then went on to explain *how* they would participate in the discussion:

Each of you is going to get two pieces of paper, on which I would like you to write two questions about the play. So what you need to do is this: ask your question, and then you can get rid of one piece of paper, which means that each of you will participate at least twice during the class period (Field notes, Austin's classroom, 1/22/03).

After some clarifying questions, Austin instructed his students to “start” the discussion, and then moved from the front to the side of the classroom. After a few minutes, a student finally read one of her questions. Another student responded, and then a third called, out, “Next question!” At this, Austin interjected. “Are you sure everyone understands the question?” A few students nodded their heads, and another student, this time a young man, read one of his questions. A different student responded, but seemed unsure of himself and his response. Again, Austin stepped in, and this time asked, “What makes you say that?” The student offered his best response, after which Austin reminded himself and his students that he was supposed to stay out of the discussion.

For most of the class period, this was how the discussion proceeded. Students only minimally engaged with each other, and there was very little connection or relation between their ideas. When students asked what Austin considered to be important questions, he re-entered the discussion, often repeated the question, and then stepped back out. For example, at one point a student asked, “What do you (students) think about the fact that the white neighbors did not want the Youngers to move into their neighborhood?” Austin believed this was an important question, so he asked the student to repeat it, and then repeated it himself. Still, few students responded, so Austin shared his perception of college dormitory life with students, that Black students seemed to hang out with other Black students, and White students seemed to hang out with other White students. This example finally sparked some discussion between students. They shared some of their perspectives – from the school hallways to hanging out during the weekends – of how we seem to separate ourselves according to skin color.

After about ten minutes of relatively engaged conversation, the bell rang, and students packed up their belongings and headed for the door. Above the ruckus, I heard Austin say to his students, “Thanks for all of your good work everyone!” Immediately following the lesson, Austin and I chatted about the discussion. Although it hadn’t gone as he had planned, he was pleased there were some moments of actual discussion. When I asked him about his role in the discussion, he indicated that he may have participated too much, which may have inhibited others from speaking and sharing their thoughts (Fieldnotes, Austin’s Classroom, 1/22/03).

During my second observation of Austin’s field placement classroom, about a month after the first, the focus was Mark Twain’s (1986) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This time, rather than removing himself from the discussion, Austin decided to read and have students respond to specific passages from the text. His objective in the lesson was to have his students recognize how we often assign characteristics to people who are different from ourselves in some way. Although Austin asked students to respond to each other’s responses and to raise questions, most of the discussion went through him. At times, he almost seemed desperate to get students to talk to each other. At one point, a student asked a question about the relationship between racism and realism. Another student mumbled a response, to which Austin replied, “What did you say? Can you repeat that, because I think what the two of you are talking about is an important issue here.”

The student responded louder and more clearly, but a discussion never really developed. Austin continued to read passages from the text, many of them around issues of race and racism, but only twice during the entire period did conversation go back and forth between the students without any teacher involvement. However, in both instances,

students almost seemed to talk over each other; it did not appear they actually listened to what the other person was saying. In my interview with Austin at the end of the semester, he talked about this aspect of open discussions:

I'm interested in creating an intellectual community through discussions, where students talk to each other about important ideas . . . but (I also think) we need in English classrooms to spend more time working on listening skills (Alex interview, p. 2).

It seems clear from this excerpt and from the two examples above that Austin believed discussions of literature held tremendous learning potential. At the same time, he did not appear entirely sure how to tap into this potential. However, by the end of the course, as reflected in the above quotation, Austin seemed to have learned that certain aspects of discussions – like listening – have to be taught. In the third and final lesson I observed, which took place in the final weeks of his student teaching, Austin's facilitated a discussion which demonstrated that he had indeed developed a clear yet complex understanding of the teacher's role in discussions.

Austin began this third lesson at an overhead projector in the front of the classroom. On the blank overhead transparency, he wrote one word, "Madonna," and then asked his students two questions: "What do we know about her?" and "Who created her?" Students shared what they knew with respect to the first question, and then to the second. Austin wrote their responses, all of them, onto the transparency, which projected onto a screen behind him. Students said things like, "the media," "television," and "magazines." Although some students seemed to disagree with others about responses to

both questions, Austin tried to move through this part of his lesson as efficiently as possible. After about fifteen minutes, he transitioned to the main part of his lesson – a character analysis of Hester, the main character in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*.

Austin opened with the same questions he asked about Madonna. He also used the same strategy of writing students’ responses onto the overhead transparency as they said them. This time, however, it allowed them to disagree with each other, but calmly reminded them a couple times throughout the discussion to “not talk over each other,” but to “listen to each other and then respond.” For the most part, students seemed well-informed and backed their responses with evidence from the text. For about twenty minutes, students engaged with each other around these questions, and had very clear differences regarding the second question. Near the end of the class period, Austin instructed his students that, for homework, he would like them to build on the conversation, as well as their own interpretations, to do a character sketch of Hester. The assignment was due in two days.

The discussion about Madonna and Hester sharply contrasted with the previous two discussions I had observed in Austin’s classroom. In this discussion, he seemed in control, yet not at the center of the lesson. He seemed to know where he wanted to go, and yet was able to allow his students space to talk about the characters in ways that were meaningful and important to them. He seemed to be purposeful in everything he did during the lesson, including the link he made between Madonna and Hester. And finally, he seemed to know how and when to insert his thoughts or input into the discussion, whether it was for logistical or content-related concerns. In my interview with Austin at the end of the semester, he talked about this final discussion.

I thought it went fairly well . . . I think I realized that I did not spend enough invested classroom time setting up my students, preparing them to participate in a discussion. Although I had thought about community building, it was never in the context of discussions. In the beginning, I pulled myself out of discussions, but that produced a lot of chaos because I had not prepared my students in advance . . . This discussion, by contrast, went very well, and I was excited that my students were able to express their own ideas, even when I was leading the discussion – in contrast to what it says in the open discussion rubric (Alex interview, p. 1).

As noted earlier, we cannot know for certain how or where Austin learned about discussions and the teacher's role in leading them. In fact, if anything, as I demonstrated in the first part of this chapter, his learning occurred in and across multiple activity settings, and through mediation around any number of tools and artifacts. What we can say is that, over the course of the semester, Austin developed a much deeper and clearer sense of his role in leading discussions. Through mediation around course tools, such as the discussion rubric noted above as well as published articles, Austin broadened his understanding of discussions. He appropriated these tools, along with his classmates' ideas, into his field placement classroom. While one might argue that Austin's learning happened "on the job," I would argue that it happened in conjunction "*with* the job." As the case of Austin clearly illustrates, through mediation with his peers around textual tools, Austin was able to develop his understanding and practice of leading discussions. In the next chapter, I explore how a second tool – the videotaped discussions – also played a critical role in the English methods activity system.

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CHAPTER FIVE

VIDEOTAPED DISCUSSIONS AS A MEDIATING TOOL

For eight class meetings in the English methods seminar, from the end of

LEARNING TO LEAD DISCUSSIONS:

CONTEXT, CONFLICT, AND COMMUNITY

VOLUME II

By Kevin George Basmadjian

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

College of Education

2005

VIDEOTAPED DISCUSSIONS AS A MEDIATING TOOL

For eight class meetings in the English methods seminar, from the end of February through the end of April, interns watched videotapes of each other leading discussions of literature in their placement classrooms. The purpose, as Stacey noted in the course syllabus, was two-fold. She wrote, "Throughout the semester, each of you will investigate a specific question or issue related to leading discussions. We will spend time in class discussing your findings and learning from videotapes of your discussions." In other words, while the expressed purpose of videotaping discussions was to gather and investigate data for interns' research projects, they also provided the class with opportunities to watch, discuss, and learn from each other's discussions. In this chapter, I focus on the latter purpose to show how, through mediation around these videotapes, interns deepened their understanding of the teacher's role in discussions of literature.

Before we look at *how* mediation around this tool shaped intern learning, I will explore *what* they learned. The two data sources I looked at to explore this issue were: 1) interviews with interns at the end of the semester, and 2) the videotaped discussions themselves, and how interns developed their practice over the course of the semester. In the following paragraphs, I draw exclusively from the first data source to share what interns reported about their growth over the semester. In Chapter Four, I offered a close analysis of the second data source to show how one intern, Austin, deepened his understanding and practice of leading discussions of literature. This approach offers a longitudinal perspective of how mediation around the various tools of the English

methods activity system interacted with interns' efforts in their field placement classrooms. discussions proved a very powerful opportunity for beginning teacher learning.

Seeing is (Part of) Believing

During interviews at the end of the English methods semester, interns indicated that discussions around their classmates' videotaped discussions were highly educative. Through multiple levels of analysis, however, I found that while all agreed these discussions were useful, *what* they learned varied widely. Given the fact that interns began the semester with varying conceptions about the teacher's role in discussions of literature, this finding is not surprising. In fact, initial beliefs played an important role in shaping intern learning because they provided a base from which interns could move and expand. In other words, through mediation around the videotaped discussions as well as other course tools, interns at both ends of the continuum seemed to deepen their understanding of discussions and the teacher's role in leading them.

In terms of changing or expanding interns' beliefs about working with students different from themselves in terms of ethnicity, social class, and/or linguistic background, mediation around the videotaped discussions seemed to have little or no impact. The reason: Intern disinterest in discussing issues of diversity related to discussions of literature. As the data will show, whenever such issues were raised during mediation around the videotaped discussions, they were quickly dropped in favor of talking more generally about discussions of literature or classroom management. In other words, while some interns did raise questions about whether and how social class or ethnicity was connected to teacher practice in discussions of literature, their voices were swallowed up

by the larger activity system. Still, as I will now illustrate, mediation around the videotaped discussions proved a very powerful opportunity for beginning teacher learning and got the students to move toward specific instructional objectives. The final sentence above sharply contrasts with her earlier beliefs about the teacher's role when she said, "I don't really see *Teacher Involvement: A Matter of Degree* in open discussions."

(Alexis) Prior to the English methods seminar, as noted in Chapter Three, Matt, Stephanie, and Alexis generally believed teachers should participate as little as possible in discussions of literature. By the end of the semester, these three interns developed a more complicated view of the teacher's role. Alexis, for example, talked about what she learned through watching and discussing Mary's videotaped discussion. She explained:

example Like Mary's type of discussion. I have never witnessed that personally. Or some product of the other discussions that I have seen classmates' tapes of. I don't know, some relative were good, some were bad . . . If I were the teacher (in Mary's case), I would be student like, "Whoa!" I would have stepped in and said, "Okay, I like what you're (she interview points) saying, and what you're (points again) saying, and you've (points again) classroom got some neat stuff to say, but let's keep talking about that." Because once you see kids talking about something that's connected to your objectives, I would stop and get them to talk about it further and deeper than just surface-discussing it for the sake of having somebody speak (Interview, p. 6).

Alexis begins by noting an important benefit of watching others lead discussions – that is, seeing different types of discussions. But perhaps more importantly, Alexis seems to put herself into Mary's shoes as she watches the discussion with her classmates

during an English methods seminar meeting. In doing this, Alexis is able to think about how she might intervene at various moments in the discussion, pull together loose strands, and get the students to move toward specific instructional objectives. The final sentence above sharply contrasts with her earlier beliefs about the teacher's role when she said, "I don't really see the teacher as needing to be that involved in open discussions" (Alexis, 5/1/2003, page 9). In other words, Alexis seemed to learn that, in contrast to her prior beliefs, teachers may need to intervene when students are talking about things connected to lesson objectives. Absent teacher involvement, the conversation is mere "surface (discussion) for the sake of having somebody speak" (Interview, 5/1/03, page 9).

Matt and Stephanie developed in similar, yet slightly different ways. Matt, for example, initially believed that students themselves were responsible for engaging in productive, meaningful discussions of literature. In his view, the teacher played a relatively insignificant role, and that "the best way to have open discussions was to allow students to talk about whatever interested them" (Interview, 5/8/2003, page 5). In my interview with Matt, he talked about how his beliefs changed after watching one of his classmates struggle to lead a discussion. He explained:

I don't remember whose it was, but there was a discussion that was almost chaotic. It seemed like the kids were unengaged, almost disrespectful, but the teacher did not seem to even try to bring the kids back. It seemed more loose or laid-back than I like to be, but it was a good comparison for me because while some looseness is okay, I think there is a fine line between chaos that is productive and chaos that is destructive (Interview, 5/8/2003).

Emily As with Alexis, Matt's views change rather dramatically after watching one of his classmate's videotaped discussions. Although he still believes that "some looseness is okay," he began to articulate a distinction between what he called "productive" and "destructive" chaos. As he reflected upon this particular videotaped discussion, he commented, "the teacher did not seem to even try to bring the kids back." His indictment of the teacher, and his/her passivity or non-involvement seems to suggest that he now believes the teacher *should* participate in discussions, particular when it doesn't seem to move in a particular direction, or when it is overly chaotic, or when students are unengaged or disrespectful toward each other.

While Matt, Stephanie and Alexis seemed to move toward believing the teacher played a more significant role than they had initially believed, the other five interns generally moved in the opposite direction. That is, through the videotaped discussions, Steve, Austin, Emily, Julia, and Kathy seemed to learn that, at times, teachers needed to step back or out of discussions and trust that students would move toward specific instructional objectives. They began to realize that if a teacher was too dominating or controlling in a discussion, students may not take ownership of their learning, which could compromise textual understanding. In the next few paragraphs, I offer examples of what these interns said about what they learned through the videotaped discussions, drawing particularly on my interviews with Emily and Kathy.

While Prior to the semester, and even during the early weeks of the course, Emily believed the teacher's central role was "to move the class toward specific objectives" (Interview, 5/6/2003, page 9). Through watching videotapes of her peers leading discussions of literature in their placement classrooms, as well as other experiences, she tried things out, made modifications, tried them again, and so on, for the duration of her teaching internship.

Emily came to understand the teacher's role in more complex terms. She began to see discussions in more flexible terms, and the relationship between teacher and students as fluid and dynamic rather than fixed and didactic. As she explained during our interview:

discuss: A lot of times your class is going to stray in ways you cannot control, but you shouldn't think that because you didn't plan it in your lesson, it's not okay to occur. That is something I had to learn on my own . . . It doesn't mean (the students) are not learning if they stray away from the objective . . . It's okay, you don't always have to have this hold on your kids (Emily Interview, 5/6/2003, page 9).

In studies of teacher learning, it is difficult if not impossible to directly correlate what teachers do with what they learn. For example, although Emily says she learned about issues of control "on (her) own"²⁸, the data suggest that a range of factors shaped her learning—among them, the videotaped discussions. In the following section, I explain how these videotapes, and the mediation around them with her classmates, may have played an important role in this process. For now, it seems important to note what Emily *did* learn during the semester, that one way to inspire engagement and achievement is by giving students ownership over their learning. In the above quotation, Emily says that if teachers "let them go," students will move toward instructional objectives "on their own." While experienced educators may challenge the validity or generalizability of this claim, her remarks lead us to conclude that Emily complicated her beliefs about the teacher's role in discussions.

²⁸ I am making the assumption here that "on my own" refers to Emily's placement classroom, where she tried things out, made modifications, tried them again, reflected further, and continued through this cycle for the duration of her teaching internship.

Kathy also developed a more complex understanding of whether and how much the teacher should participate in discussions of literature. At the start of the semester, as noted previously, Kathy believed it was critical for teachers to play a central role in discussions of literature, from generating discussion questions to managing the discussion itself. Through her experiences in the English methods seminar, coupled with her teaching internship, she began to rethink the teacher's role, particularly with respect to setting and meeting specific instructional objectives. In my interview with Kathy, she explained: *Watching my classmates lead discussions made me decide maybe what I do or don't want to do with my students. I think a big thing that I came up with in talking with everyone is, I think, mostly about objectives, and trying to create objectives for a discussion that you don't even know where it's leading to or going. And how to open up students in a discussion and how to motivate them to speak and get them started* (Interview, 4/30/03, page 3).

During the seventh class meeting of the semester, which occurred in late February, The videotaped discussions helped Kathy rethink the purpose of discussions in English classrooms. In contrast to her beliefs early in the semester, when she believed she "had to control what was coming out of students' mouths," she seemed to learn that discussions, like humans themselves, are alive and rather unpredictable. Moreover, her remarks reveal an emerging understanding of the relationship between instructional objectives for discussions, and the need to stay aware of their organic tendencies. And finally, her comments clearly challenge her earlier view that in order to have a good discussion, she and her students "had to move toward some larger idea, something about

the text.” In the excerpt above she seems to have learned that preparing for a discussion is not as simple as identifying a specific instructional objective. Rather, teachers must think about who their students are, where the discussion might go, and how to keep students motivated as they delve into textual meaning and interpretation.

Interviews with Steve, Austin, and Julia revealed experiences very similar to Emily and Kathy. Whereas at the start of the semester they believed teachers should be steadfast in their pursuit of instructional objectives, the videotaped discussions helped them to understand the teacher’s role in different, more flexible terms. But *how* did this happen? How did the videotaped discussions, and the conversations around them, help interns at both ends of the continuum develop a more complete, nuanced understanding of the teacher’s role? Drawing on intern interviews, as well as transcripts from the English methods seminar, I now address these and other relevant issues and questions.

February 26, 2003: Videotaped Discussions

Opening Talk through Video
During the seventh class meeting of the seminar, which occurred in late February, interns began presenting their videotaped discussions to the teacher and their classmates. On the course syllabus, the topic for this date read, “Analyze discussion videos.” The actual discussion assignment (see Appendix C) indicated that students should:

Bring each (discussion) video, and a copy of the lesson plan used the day of each discussion, your investigation plan and a summary of your results to class on the two due dates. You will have a chance to discuss each other’s discussion videos in the course.

discussed *Pride and Prejudice*. She explained that she had been assigned to read the book and

during In other words, as noted earlier, the videotaped discussions served two purposes – to provide evidence for interns’ research projects, and to provide in-class opportunities for the class to discuss the videotaped discussions. The data suggest that while the former purpose was useful in starting discussions about the videotaped lessons, the latter purpose played an integral role in helping interns develop a deep understanding of discussions of literature and the teacher’s role in leading them. In the following paragraphs, I describe and explain how this process unfolded, drawing on transcripts from the English methods seminar as well as from interviews with interns. However, as with the course literature and discussion rubric, mediation around these videotapes was a cumulative process. In an attempt to describe and explain this process from an activity theory perspective, I offer three discussions from three different class sessions. (Transcript, p. 277)

In essence, June: February 26, 2003: Videotaped Discussion and how much the teacher June volunteered to be the first intern to share her videotaped discussion with her classmates. Stacey explained how she would like June, as well as the other interns, to present their videotaped discussions:

Okay, now what I want you to do is give some context for the discussion, like subject and grade level, what you hoped to accomplish in the discussion, what your research question is, and what the class should watch for and how we might help you (Transcript, p. 12).

Emily: I kind of see it as once it gets to the point where you’re done, what’s June explained that she videotaped her advanced junior English class while they discussed *Pride and Prejudice*. She explained that she told her students that at some point

during the discussion, everyone had to speak at least once. She noted to the interns that this was the third discussion she had led since the start of the semester. When one of her classmates asked how she assessed whether all students participated, June explained:

I said to them, "If you want credit for participation, you need to participate." So I might say, "Hey David, I haven't heard from you." So I still haven't completely relinquished control. They still have to raise their hands, and if the discussion goes in a direction that I do not want it to go in, I step in and redirect. So my question is: How do I hold students accountable for participation, but make the discussion more real, while at the same time keep it on track without bouncing from one random thing to another? In other words, if you were their teacher, how would you prevent the choppiness of the discussion (Transcript, p. 27)?

is happening here.

In essence, June is asking about the teacher's role, and when and how much the teacher should step in to redirect a discussion of literature. As the following transcript illustrates, June's research question created the context for a productive discussion about teacher participation in discussions.

Stacey: So do you want us to look for what is happening when the choppiness happens?

June: Yes, I know when it is happening, but I am trying to figure out what is going on when it does happen.

Emily: I kind of see it as once it gets to the point that it's getting robotic, what's really happening? Is it the subject they're on? Is it the combination of students? Is it their prompts?

June: It's because I'm calling on you and not Maggie. It's because, and I saw this when I was taping, when I call on you instead of Maggie, who had her hand raised, and you go off, then Maggie's thought is lost by the time I get back to you. My insight is lost. Yet, I want them to be responsible. I don't want to have to ask, "Does anyone have anything to add onto what Emily said?"

Stacey: So maybe if we think about the rubric as we watch this videotape, we can help you to think about how to do what you want to do. So we might see things that you have not, drawing from the rubric.

June: Yes, definitely. In fact, the part of the rubric I am trying to address in this discussion is, "Students' questions respond to and build on contributions of others, often leading to 'Ah-hah' moments for self or others." But I don't feel that is happening here.

In the transcript excerpt above, all of which occurs before June actually shows her videotaped discussion, mediation centers on the issue of flow in a discussion of literature. Emily offers several ideas in response to June's question, to which June offers her best explanation. After Stacey recommends the class think about the discussion rubric as they watch the videotaped discussion, we learn that June used a specific outcome from the rubric in developing her questions. As noted earlier, the overlap between mediating tools in activity systems is common, and in the transcript that follows the videotaped discussion, we see how this overlap contributes to intern development.

In the videotaped classroom discussion, students raise their hands to participate. They are seated in a large circle, and seem to listen respectfully to each other. Students

share what they think about the text, to which others respond, ask additional questions, or offer opinions and perspectives of their own. The discussion seems to go back and forth between personal responses to the text and more text-centered interpretations. In the five-minute clip, June does not appear to intervene at all, but because of the camera angle, we are not able to see if she communicates non-verbally. The discussion definitely picks up steam as it progresses, as students increasingly appear to respond to each other's sharing questions and ideas. Maggie initiates the post-videotape discussion: how you get that

Maggie: I noticed the “builders” – those who would say, “Going along with that”

– as very different from those who would introduce a new topic each time, and

I’m wondering if it would be helpful to talk about the ways in which students help

or make difficult a class discussion; how “builders” really do build a discussion

by building on what others say. in thinking that if you want them to get to that next

level of critical thinking, then think, “How can I get them to connect to this

Although Maggie’s comments seem both relevant and important to June’s questions, neither Stacey nor the other students pick up on her ideas until much later in the discussion, using very different language and vocabulary. In fact, as the post-videotape discussion continues in the English methods seminar, Stacey asks a question that seems completely unrelated: next one will be that they will go off on their essay

Stacey: One question I had and you may have answered this, but do you give

them prompts or do they come up with their own?

June: Both. I gave them a list of S-generated prompts from last year, and they turned those in a day before. I went through and picked out the more textual ones, but they also could come up with their own. So it was a combination of prompts

from lots of sources, including some from the actual textbook from which we were reading.

Danielle: I'm really curious about that because, I mean, I'm kinda jealous, and it's cool to watch the discussion of another class because, it's so different. I mean I'm jealous because your students are so . . . good! I mean, because my students are like, "Na dawg, I don't agree wit dat!" And you got another kid that's coming, and it's like so chaotic, you know what I mean? So I wonder how you get that done. But one thing I notice about my discussions is how productive in the ways that they talk, and the ways that they think about the text has so much to do with what I do outside of those discussions. So if I want them to think more critically—because one thing I noticed is your students talk very much about the text, which is something I'm lacking. So I'm thinking that if you want them to get to that next level of critical thinking, then think, "How can I get them to connect to this more?" Because you said, they didn't even connect to those prompts!

June: Right, even though they did do that later on.

Danielle: So, was the purpose here to build on each other's ideas?

June: The purpose of this one was to get them to get back into the flow of discussions, and then the next one will be stuff that will be covered on their essay exams. It's also to see that they are reading the text appropriately, and there were some things that they were just off completely with the text, so I had to spend some time talking about those misunderstandings.

object In the above excerpt, prompted by June's videotaped discussion, Danielle talks about getting her students to talk more openly and critically about texts. Through **ives** watching the videotaped discussion, she comes to realize that in order to encourage productive participation, teachers need to help students connect on a personal level to **to** what they are reading and discussing. June's videotaped discussion leads Danielle to reflect on discussions with her own students. She notes, "The ways that (my students) think about the text has so much to do with what I do outside of those discussions." In **in** other words, the teacher plays an important role not only *during* a discussion of literature, but also in preparing students to think and talk about texts in ways that are meaningful to them. Thus, through mediation around June's videotaped discussion, interns appeared to deepen and broaden their understanding of the teacher's role discussions of literature.

In responding to Danielle's question about the purpose of the discussion, June reiterates in a slightly different way the tension she experienced before between playing too active a role in discussions and allowing her students to leave her class with textual misunderstandings. She explains that while she accomplished her goal of getting students into the flow of a discussion, "there were some things that they were just off completely with the text, so I had to spend some time talking about those misunderstandings." In other words, even though her primary purpose in the discussion was to get students to talk and listen to each other, June did not want students to walk away with misunderstandings about the text. **of the teacher to help**

sec, in What seems important to recall here is that not all interns held the same beliefs about the teacher's role in discussions of literature. Some, like Matt and Stephanie and Alexis, felt that teachers should participate only marginally, regardless of instructional

objectives. Others, like Steve, Austin, Emily, Julia, and Kathy, believed that teachers should play an active role in moving students toward specific instructional objectives. Thus, in thinking about the tension June experiences with respect to her role and situation, we are drawn to Leont'ev's (1978) theory on the relationship between conflict and development in activity systems:

The internal tensions and contradictions of (an activity) system are the motive force of change and development. They are accentuated by continuous transitions and transformations between these components of an activity system, and between the embedded hierarchical levels of collective motive-driven activity, individual goal-driven action, and automatic operations driven by the tools and conditions of action (Leont'ev, 1978).

I draw attention to Danielle's comments because, as I will later demonstrate, At the time of June's first videotaped discussion, it is probably safe to assume that interns have very different conceptions of the teacher's role in discussions. It is, after all, only seven weeks into the semester. And while some shifts have occurred, as suggested in the previous chapter concerning the influence of course documents, interns' beliefs are still rather disparate, and therefore serve as a motivating force of change and development. As the discussion continues (below), and again in two additional class transcripts, we see how tension and mediation through the videotaped discussions serves to expand interns' understanding of the teacher's role in discussions of literature. We also see, in the above transcript, how interns' beliefs about leading discussions might be connected to their beliefs about students in diverse, urban schools.

Danielle's response in the transcript above has some implications for teachers working with culturally, socially, and/or linguistically diverse students. Although Danielle teaches in one of two magnet high schools in a large Midwestern city, both of which have strict entrance examinations, she says to June, "I'm jealous because your students are so . . . good! I mean, because my students are like, 'Na dawg, I don't agree wit dat!'" Although she never clearly states what she means by "good" in the above sentence, it seems to have something to do with how June's students politely but actively listen and respond to each other. By contrast, all Danielle's students can say to each other is "Na dawg, I don't agree wit dat!" A few sentences later, however, Danielle seems to recognize that regardless of school or context, if teachers can help students make connections to texts, discussions can be highly productive.

I draw attention to Danielle's comments because, as I will later demonstrate, interns' beliefs about students' cultural backgrounds and experiences seem to increasingly intersect with their understanding of the teacher's role in discussions of literature. Thus, in order to understand how mediation around the tools of the English methods activity system enabled interns to learn and develop, we must also examine their beliefs as tools – in this case, beliefs about students different from themselves in terms of social, cultural, and/or linguistic background. In Danielle's case, a good discussion seems to involve students who listen and participate according to a particular conception of courtesy and politeness. In later excerpts, we will see how varying conceptions of student behavior and participation patterns during discussions contribute to a deeper understanding of the teacher's role.

As the conversation following June's videotaped discussion continues, Danielle, June, and a couple other interns consider another tension: the contrast between natural conversations between people in social situations and the practical, utilitarian purposes of class discussions in schools:

Danielle: One thing I noticed is that the discussion had a sort of utility function, almost like, okay, we're going to discuss "X" today, like characterization. So I would think to myself, "How can I get them to contemplate more in the open classroom?" Do you know what I mean?

June: Yes, I know where you are going. There are a few students that do that, but not many. Um, but I think a big hindrance on that is the fact that they have to call on each other, and if you call on me and I don't have anything to say, the conversation stops. There is no flow to the conversation.

Someone: It's not like a natural social conversation.

June: Right, but I don't want that either. I want them to listen to each other, to build on what each other says. I want structure. And they learn from this. I gave them a survey after Shakespeare and they indicated that open discussions had the most positive and profound impact on their learning. It wasn't me up there lecturing; it is them working through it, and it is not as though they've done this before – they're learning as they go here, learning from each other, etc.

Gene: In your discussions, what happens if students get cut off, or the discussion ends? Does their thought just die?

June: They know that they can write down their thoughts, and bring them up later. They can do whatever they want, including write about things later on.

Kathy: It's hard to figure out, because I have also had some of that "utility" discussion, where students raise their hands and are like, "I agree." So I am wondering if it's the teacher's presence that causes that, or if that happens all the time.

the next open discussion, and I talk to them about it, and get their feedback, everything I do here (points to screen) is their ideas – 100 percent their

In this excerpt, June admits that while she doesn't necessarily want to have to call on students to get them to participate, she also doesn't want a completely open, organic conversation, where the topic moves in any and all directions. She explains, "I want with structure," but within that structure she hopes that students will work through the discussion, try to figure things out on their own, and learn from each other. In openly sharing these apparently opposite perspectives, June and her classmates embrace these tensions together, and work to figure out ways to think deeply about and perhaps even resolve them.

One example of this comes through Gena's concern for students who get "cut off" and may not get a chance to participate. She asks June how she resolves this issue, to which June responds that she allows students to write things down, which they can bring up later on. In talking through the tension associated with interrupting the natural flow of a discussion, the interns reach new ground with each other. Through mediation around June's videotaped discussion, the interns are able to raise concerns from their own practice, and think in both theoretical as well as practical terms about the role of the teacher. As the conversation continues, we see this even further, instances where the uncertainty of the interns, both individually and collectively, leads to new insights and understandings about the teacher's role.

Maggie: I think you did a great job by not preparing them. This way, they jump out into it, and you tell them how they can make it even better, you know.

June: Well what's interesting is that if I go back to them, which I usually do two more before the next open discussion, and I talk to them about it, and get their feedback, everything I do here (points to screen) is their ideas – 100 percent their ideas: "We need more prompts," "I need my questions answered," "I don't know what's going on in this thing," "I'm so confused!" So it's totally their feedback.

So if I just ask them how I can make this a better discussion, they'll come up with all sorts of ideas.

Jason: It would be interesting to contrast what you did here with having someone be in charge of calling on people to respond.

June: Yeah, I'm almost thinking, and I know this sounds very structured, but I would hope it could be a scaffold, to ask, "Does anyone want to add on to that?"

And then once they see that practiced, I can take that part out.

Through mediation with her classmates around her videotaped discussion, June begins to think in different ways about her role as the teacher, and her concern to lead a discussion that flows. Through conversation with her peers, and ideas that emerge through the English methods activity system, June deepens her understanding about the limitations of the teacher in discussions of literature. She also comes to new realizations which, through mediation around other tools during the semester, continue to change and become more nuanced. But June, Danielle, and the other interns discussed above were not the only intern who developed through mediation around June's videotaped

discussions. In my interviews with participants at the end of the semester, all talked about how the videotaped discussions – their own as much as others’ – helped them to deepen their understanding of the teacher’s role in discussions of literature. After reviewing two more excerpted transcripts from the English methods seminar, I will present data from all those interviews.

conversation sort of lulled, until one student brought up some textual support, and then you saw

March 12, 2003: Videotaped Discussion 1

Two weeks after June presented her videotaped discussion to the class, Matt shared his videotape with his classmates. In his videotaped discussion, students are seated in a circle, and Matt opens the discussion by asking, “What is Social Darwinism?” His students are reading William Golding’s (1959) *Lord of the Flies*, and most seem eager to participate in the discussion. The class is a relatively mixed class in terms of race and ethnicity, and from what I know of Matt’s school, students also vary in terms of social class (although students from middle and working-class families predominate the school). In the ten minute excerpt, students raise their hands, and Matt calls on them to speak. He expressly tells his students that he wants to say as little as possible in the discussion, and often deflects questions directed towards him by saying to his students, “I don’t know. What do *you* guys think?”

After about ten minutes, Matt stopped the videotape player to explain to his peers that the discussion took place with his tenth grade honors English class. He then opened the videotape for discussion by asking his classmates, “So what did you guys think?” Alexis, who entered the seminar with the belief that the teacher’s primary role in

discussions of literature was procedural – that is, monitoring student behavior – opened the post-videotape discussion with a rather sharp critique of Matt's pedagogy.

Alexis: I noticed that your question, "What is social Darwinism," and you're getting kids to think about what that means, I think your question was too difficult. And I didn't see you ask many probing questions, so it seemed the

conversation sort of lulled, until one student brought up some textual support, and then you saw several students participate.

Julie: I think you demonstrate the importance of enthusiasm, like the way a student asked you a question and you responded, "I don't know!" Just the way you said it seemed to engage many of the students who didn't talk. And even though it's a bit theatrical, I think that's needed every now and then.

Matt: In the beginning, all the students were asking me questions, so part of doing that was to turn it back to them. I got the impression that not many of them have had much experience in that sort of discussion.

Maggie: I saw that too, how they seemed to look at you, but then I also thought, "Well maybe they were just trying to get their points, since you were grading them based on their participation. And that's how participation points can sometimes get in the way."

As the post-videotape discussion commences, we quickly see evidence of

mediation in the English methods activity system leading to deeper understanding of the teacher's role in discussions of literature. Alexis is rather critical of Matt's approach, and seems to imply that if a teacher wants an engaging and dynamic discussion, the teacher

must ask “probing questions” along the way. In other words, Alexis seems to believe that, contrary to her earlier beliefs, teachers must play an active role in promoting intellectual thought during discussions of literature. Although we cannot directly attribute Alexis’ change in thinking to a specific mediating tool, it seems plausible to suggest that they influenced her understanding.

In addition to lack of teacher involvement, Alexis also addresses Matt’s choice for an opening question, and suggests it may have been “too difficult” for students. This critique, too, suggests a deepened understanding of the teacher’s role in discussions of literature for Alexis. At the start of the semester, as noted earlier in this chapter, Alexis talked very little about the issue of accommodations to learners. Through watching Matt interact with his students, and through mediating around this tool with her classmates, Alexis very quickly recognizes the relationship between teacher behavior and student learning.

In contrast to Alexis, June offers a more positive reaction to Matt’s discussion. She talks about Matt’s enthusiasm, and responds in part to Alexis’ critique by saying, “The way you (responded) seemed to engage many of the students who didn’t talk.” In saying this, June makes space for Matt and his classmates to talk about and learn from the videotaped discussion. Matt and Maggie follow with two important observations. First, Matt starts to realize that very few of his students have had much experience participating in discussions, a point that several interns mentioned they learned during their final interviews. In response, Maggie says, “I saw that too,” and then goes on to talk about the tension between giving points for participating, and the fact that participation points often “get in the way” of good discussions.

The following excerpt picks up about five minutes later, and hones in on the ideas raised above, particularly with respect to preparing students to participate in discussions of literature. The excerpt is important not only because of which interns speak up, but also because it illustrates how mediation around this particular tool, the videotaped discussions, allows the English methods activity system to individually and collectively move toward deeper understanding of the teacher's role in discussions. I begin with Danielle, a rather outspoken intern who constantly struggled with ways to productively engage her students in discussions.

Danielle: In terms of the content that was discussed, I'm wondering what kind of prep work you did. I had a discussion that didn't go very well, I remember very early on, and David (her field instructor) came in and helped me model like a free-write, and then a pair-share, and so by the time we got to the discussion, it was like amazing. So I was wondering if you thought of doing some preparation on the concept of Social Darwinism, which is a pretty complex issue.

Matt: Yes, we did some work on cliques, and talking about how social pressure can influence who we hang out with, etc.

Danielle: Did you think about building on that idea and then moving into the concept of social Darwinism? Because a lot of them seemed like it was just too over their heads, like they were lost.

Matt: I see what you're saying, but like in this case, and these students were honors students and I really wanted to see if they could rise to the level of the conversation. I knew there were some students in the class who could handle it right away, so I wanted to just see where they would take it, and how the others

might jump in. It was definitely a challenging concept, but some of them really did a good job with it.

Kathy: I've been thinking a lot lately about preparation. Stacey e-mailed me some ideas that got me thinking about maybe changing my question, re-evaluating my inquiry, and I think I've come to this: There are two ways to prepare for a discussion – social preparation and a cognitive preparation . . . Like, I guess cognitively, I prep my students about the concepts, themes, etc. And then teaching them *how* to talk about it, so I started them on dialogue journals, and other activities where students are required to talk to each other, hoping that would transfer to the larger, whole-class setting.

In this excerpt, still prompted by Matt's videotaped discussion, the focus turns toward preparing students for discussions. Danielle initiates the discussion by talking about some of the things she learned to do in order to facilitate better discussions, particularly for a "complex issue" like social Darwinism. These ideas reflect tremendous growth for Danielle, who just two weeks earlier talked about what her student could *not* do. Here, she talks about things the teacher can do to facilitate rich conversations. She also acknowledges Alexis' earlier concern about the level of difficulty, and encourages Matt and the rest of her classmates to think and talk about preparing students for thinking and participating in discussions.

Matt responds by sharing ways in which he attempted to prepare his students, but also acknowledges that in part he wanted to "see where (his students) would take it, and how others might jump in." From his response, we get the sense that if he were to do

things again, he might incorporate some of his classmates' ideas into his planning, and to prepare his students in different ways for a discussion centered around social Darwinism and *Lord of the Flies*. Kathy, who from the beginning of the semester has believed the teacher plays a central role in leading discussions of literature, talks about things she has begun to realize in terms of preparation. Through conversations with Stacey, as well as through mediation with her peers around some of the tools of the activity system, she has come to realize that there are at least two levels of preparation for discussions: cognitive, which deals with themes and concepts; and social, which addresses actual participation in discussions. I have some really quiet students as well, so I'm realizing that, you know,

This excerpt, combined with the excerpt just before it, offers a clear illustration of how mediation around the videotaped discussions worked, and how it helped interns to deepen their understanding of the teacher's role in discussions of literature. Interns [link](#) watched the videotaped discussions together, and then raised topics or questions in response. These topics or questions, which often sprang from their own field placement experiences, created space for interns to exchange ideas, to express frustrations, and to individually and collectively develop new ideas, approaches, strategies, and insights. At times, such as in the excerpt below, issues of culture intersected with beliefs about the teacher's role in discussions of literature. I raise these here not only because of this [relationship](#), but also because issues of culture were present throughout the semester. In the following excerpt, Matt talks about some of the challenges he faced in getting students from different cultures to participate in discussions.

[to say](#) **Matt:** I've got a lot of Asian students in my class, and part of their culture, [discuss](#) especially for the girls, is very reserved and quiet. They don't, they're not

outgoing people just by their cultural practices, and it's hard to get them to talk, to go out onto a limb. And we did, I had them get into small groups. I found that if I put them into the groups, there is some success. Interesting that, while Maggie: It's interesting that you bring that up, the cultural stuff. Matt: It is. Everett is very culturally diverse. A lot of kids from all sorts of different backgrounds. Emily: I don't think it's such a bad thing to recognize that in your classroom. Um, because you're in such a diverse environment, um, it is a part of their culture. I mean, I have some really quiet students as well, so I'm realizing that, you know, they're really smart on paper, and they're pretty reserved and they're really good listeners during discussions. And you know what, they're strength might be on paper, while others will be during discussions, and that's okay. So I don't think that's such a bad thing.

Although the focus in this excerpt is on cultural differences related to participation patterns, its relation to the teacher's role seems apparent, particularly for Matt. Because Asian girls are, in Matt's words, "not outgoing people," there is only so much he can do as their teacher to get them to talk during discussions of literature. At the same time, Matt does offer some of the strategies he employed to get students to participate, such as putting them into smaller discussion groups. And while Maggie does not explicitly disagree with Matt's assessment of cultural differences, her response seems to suggest that she had not previously linked cultural background to participation in discussions.

Emily, by contrast, seems to agree with Matt's analysis of his students. She suggests that teachers should get to know students' strengths and create lessons, including discussions, that acknowledge and honor these strengths. Interesting that, while it is highly unlikely either Matt or Emily would accept this argument for reading or writing, they appear unconcerned that so many students opt not to participate in discussions of literature. In other words, for Matt and Emily, it is acceptable to use culture to excuse some students from participating in discussions of literature. I wonder: Would parents or teachers ever allow culture to be used to excuse students from learning how to read or write? Not likely.

I end the above excerpt with Emily's response because after she spoke, the notion of culture was essentially dropped. In fact, throughout the semester, when and if students mentioned the word culture, it was briefly discussed and then quickly dropped. In most cases, students talked around issues of culture, as in the following examples taken from transcripts from the English methods seminar throughout the semester:

Danielle: It seems like *Tuesdays with Morrie* really facilitates (a personal experience) type of discussion. But it seems that some of the older, more traditional texts are harder for my students to connect to (February 26, 2003).

Scott: It's a lot different with my honors class, who are a lot better at independent thinking. These kids are not . . . (March 27, 2003).

Liz: Are you kidding? That's not my students. If my students get a D (grade) they're like, "Yeah! I got a D!" Grades don't matter to my students (April 3, 2003).

June: I don't know, maybe I don't have the answer, but it's just . . . I mean I hear your guys' situation and you're in a *totally* different context (April 3, 2003).

for interns, I offer below a rather lengthy and unedited transcription excerpt following Maggie. These statements, combined with interns' entering beliefs (noted earlier in this chapter), suggest that interns' views about students from diverse cultural, social, and/or linguistic backgrounds did not significantly change over the course of the semester. But given the lack of meaningful conversation around these issues, in relation to the videotaped discussions or otherwise, this finding is hardly surprising. When interns talked about students' cultural backgrounds in relation to discussions of literature, it was in terms of the limited role of the teacher. In other words, certain cultural issues (such as those mentioned by Matt and Emily) were beyond the teacher's control, and therefore unchangeable.

By contrast, mediation around the videotaped discussions seemed to propel most if not all interns toward a deeper understanding of the teacher's role in discussions of literature. In the transcript excerpt below, also from the March 12, 2003 class session, we see how interns use Maggie's videotaped discussion to think in novel ways about the teacher's role. As with each excerpt presented in this chapter, some interns are more confident than others, some have more experience, some are more knowledgeable, and each work in unique field placement settings. But through mediation around the videotaped discussions, each of these diverse perspectives and experiences interact with each other, resulting in conflict and tension that ultimately leads to a more informed understanding of the teacher's role in leading discussions.

saying since day one, "No one talks about"

In order to best show how conflict-laden mediation led to deeper understanding for interns, I offer below a rather lengthy and unedited transcription excerpt following Maggie's videotaped discussion. In the videotape, most students seem engaged and, for the most part, seem to respond to each other. Many pick up on each other's comments and perspectives, although it seems the louder ones get heard at the expense of the quieter voices. At one point during the discussion, we hear Maggie (the teacher) say, "I want you to hear what other people have to say!" A girl talks about the word "slut" is appropriated differently for boys and girls. Recognizing the importance of this to the broader discussion, Maggie again tries to get everyone's attention, but to no avail. She shares her frustrations with her classmates, and what follows is a significant portion of the post-videotape conversation:

Jan: You know, I went to observe Julie the other day, and she asked Ss to move their desks into a circle, and they did it like that! And then, during the discussion, they talked one a time, without raising their hands, and I was like, "Wow!" And after, I asked her – because she is too shy to speak up here – but she told me, right out of the box, during the first week of school, she set the decorum, "When one person is speaking, no one else should be talking. And that doesn't matter if it's me, or someone else." And she said it took several weeks, they made mistakes, but they learned over time, and that's where it hit me, we've got to train these kids!

Maggie: Right, but is it too late now? I've got a month left. I mean, I've been saying since day one, "No one talks when I talk."

Jan: But are there any consequences if they do?

Maggie: Not really. What am I going to do, kick everyone out of my class?

Everyone talks! I'll be there left alone talking to myself!

Jan: I have a friend of mine who teaches middle school and what he does, in the first few days of school, is he hands his kids a list of rules, and hands them a list of consequences if they break those rules. And what he does, if they talk out of turn, for example, is he just walks over and hands the S a sheet of paper, and it may be a detention, it may be a letter from mom or dad, it may be to stay after school, whatever. But the point is that this is something he started the first days of school, so he doesn't really have any problems with that, and that's middle school! But he follows through, which is the most important part.

June: Um, I guess just to add on to something, when you said, um, is it too late or whatever, I mean, I left it up to the kids. I didn't call them regulators or anything, but just to say to them how important this is, this is a lifelong skill. As adults, we need to be able to talk and listen to each other, to value others' opinions. This is a life skill, not just something you will use in here and drop at the door. And I have never, ever had to say, "Shhh" or "Quiet down," and that's totally fine, but what is amazing is that, I mean I told them that I want us to develop ideas more, but I am afraid of all this stuff happening, you know, just honesty, just being honest with my Ss. I would say, you know, if Maggie and I want to talk at the same time, and Maggie wants to talk, then I'm gonna write down my thoughts and save them for later, you know what I mean? I know it sounds very procedural, but -

Maggie: I mean, yes, I know it would work, it's just, at the time I . . .

Emily: I have an idea. Why don't you, when you debrief about this, or before your next discussion, you can say, "During the last discussion, I had to say . . . ten times. That is very disruptive to a discussion. What can we do together to make this stop happening?" And then have them decide what to do, and write it on the board. That way, they're empowering it, and that's what I did with my kids. I had discussions before the ones you saw, and I had them take it upon themselves, and so I'd try that!

Maggie: Good idea.

Julian: Um, I recently empowered my ninth graders (class laughs) in that, when we discuss, and they start to talk to themselves or not listen to each other, I stop talking or else I start just looking at my watch and they know what I am doing, which is adding up minutes that I will add on to the end of the class, after the bell rings. So when they see me looking at my watch, the rest of the class says, "Shut up! Do you want to stay after?!" And they all get quiet.

Maggie: Yeah. I've tried that. And three of my Ss, seniors, said what would you do if we all just walked out of here? And I said, "Absolutely nothing! I mean, you'll have to go and see the principal," but really what am I supposed to do. It's just, like, discouraging . . . I don't know. Maybe it's more just frustrating. I mean, I like them, they like me, and we've built a good community and maybe I've been too flexible or lenient. I mean, it doesn't really bother me, but when Cathy, my field instructor, comes in, it bothers her, and so it's really not –

Danielle: It should bother you though.

Maggie: No, it doesn't bother me that –

have to Danielle: I mean it should bother you that you're not getting what you want in

Maggie your classroom, you know what I mean? ... yet another idea, from another

classroom Maggie: Yeah. talks about different ways she has tried to "empower" her students.

Danielle: I mean, forget what everybody else thinks, you know what I mean, like, in which you should, if it's something that you care about, but if it's not, like that was good

"It should (the discussion), they were into it – ...ing the level of respect and courtesy in her

classroom Maggie: I'm happy that they were into it, but I guess if there are some things I just

I mean could change about my classroom management, I would, but – it's not, like that

(discussion) was good, they were into it!" Maggie acknowledges that she was happy her

students In this rather lengthy excerpt, we see several diverse perspectives come into play

with each other. In the videotaped discussion that precipitates this discussion, Maggie's

students do not appear to closely listen to each other when they are speaking. Maggie is

frustrated by this, but feels unsure of how to proceed with only "a month left" in the

semester. Jan offers a couple different perspectives. First, she talks about her experience

visiting June's classroom, where students paid attention to each other and were respectful

when others were speaking. She shared that in order to achieve respect in the classroom,

students must be taught to speak and listen in discussions very early on in the semester.

respect After Maggie agrees and says that she felt the only thing left to do was send

students out of the classroom, Jan offers another perspective. She talks about a friend of

hers who teaches middle school and has learned that the most important thing when it

comes to enforcing respect in the classroom is consistency. June then chimes in to share

that her classroom experiences have not all been simple or straightforward. But she

stresses that above all, as beginning teachers, we have to be honest with our students. We

have to share with them our fears and concerns as well as our goals and expectations. Maggie seems to understand, but is interrupted by yet another idea, from another classmate, Erica, who talks about different ways she has tried to “empower” her students. Julian and Danielle round out this particular excerpt. Julian offers different ways in which he has attempted to empower his students, while Danielle insists to Maggie that “It should bother you” that she is not achieving the level of respect and courtesy in her classroom. Danielle exclaims, “Forget about what everybody else thinks, you know what I mean? Like, you should, if it’s something that you care about. But if it’s not, like that (discussion) was good, they were into it!” Maggie acknowledges that she was happy her students seemed “into” the discussion, but responds at the end by saying, “I guess if there are some things I could change about my classroom management, I would.”

The various perspectives on Maggie’s situation creates a productive tension that ultimately leads Maggie and her classmates to new ideas and levels of understanding. In this case, the issue revolves around respect and students listening to each other during discussions. Maggie contests or qualifies every one of her classmates’ ideas or perspectives excerpt one (“Good idea”), but ultimately learns something from each and every one of them. The varying perspectives create opportunities for students to respectfully challenge each other, which helps them to grow and learn from each other. In the above excerpt, Maggie is like Leont’ev’s hunter, whose goal is very specific to her task, that of classroom management. But in a broader view, Maggie’s efforts are very much related to the larger effort of this activity system, that of understanding the teacher’s role in discussions of literature.

The transcription excerpts presented in this chapter are representative of the mediation that transpired in the English methods activity system. Collectively, the excerpts illustrate how mediation around the tools of the activity system – in this case videotaped discussions – allowed interns to deepen their understanding of the teacher's role in discussions of literature. As the various excerpts in this section show, mediation did not follow a particular format or protocol. At times, as in the case above, interns challenged each other's ideas and perspectives. At other times, they borrowed each other's language even as they offered different explanations or solutions to problems (as in the excerpt above and how the word "empower" is used and appropriated by Emily and Julian). At still other times, as in the excerpt which follows Matt's videotaped discussion, interns arrived at new insights by building on each other's ideas. In short, while mediation around the videotaped discussions took on a range of formats and appearances, it quite routinely led to deeper understanding regarding the teacher's role in discussions of literature. Although each of the post-videotape discussions looked very different once they got going, they all began quite organically. For example, an intern might ask about something he or she had seen in the videotape, or comment on what the teacher had done. Although Stacey had loosely established a protocol for the post-videotape discussions earlier in the semester – that is, that students should comment on the lead teacher's research question – she did not offer any specific format or structure. But the interns very quickly developed a form of mediation that worked for them, both on an individual and collective level. Individually, they responded to the videotaped discussions based on their personalities, beliefs about discussions, and field placement experiences. Collectively,

they built on each other's contributions in order to better understand the teacher's role in leading discussions of literature. *...not spans their entire lives, the latter concerns only the years ...* In addition to thinking and talking about this aspect of discussions, mediation around the videotaped discussions centered around two other themes – preparing students for discussions, and the relationship between discussions and students' cultural *...backgrounds*. In terms of preparing students for discussions, interns eventually came to understand that in order to lead engaging, productive discussions of literature, teachers needed to prepare their students ahead of time. As interview data in the next section will show, however, this did not mean a day or two in advance, but a semester or year-long *...commitment* to helping students think about what it means and how to participate in a *...discussion*. Through mediation with their classmates around the videotaped discussions, interns began to realize that if discussions stalled or completely failed, they, and not their students, were to blame.

Finally, through mediation around these videotaped discussions, interns began to explore the relationship between effective discussions of literature and their beliefs about students from social or cultural backgrounds different from their own. In most cases, however, these conversations did lead to any substantive epiphanies. While interns eventually deepened their understanding of their role in preparing for and facilitating discussions, most continued to blame students in diverse, urban schools when discussions did not go well. (As noted earlier), there are several possible reasons for this, including the fact that: 1) not all interns taught in socio-culturally diverse schools and classrooms; 2) insufficient time was committed towards examining interns' entering beliefs about students different from themselves in terms of ethnicity or social class; and 3) interns

have held beliefs and stereotypes about students much longer than they have for or about discussions of literature. The former spans their entire lives, the latter concerns only the years since they decided to become English teachers.

In the following section, I use interview data to illustrate how interns' beliefs changed (or did not change) over the semester. I present data in relation to the three themes presented above – the teacher's role in discussions, preparing students to participate in discussions, and beliefs about socially or culturally diverse students. However, as noted at the close of Chapter Four, it would be inaccurate and misleading to attribute shifts in interns' thinking solely to the videotaped discussions. No doubt, as this chapter has illustrated, the videotaped discussions played a critical role, and provided the context for rich, substantive mediation. But in the larger picture, mediation around these videotaped discussions represented just one aspect of intern learning in a vast and complex activity setting.

What They Said They Learned

Chaos and Control: The Teacher's Role

My interviews with interns at the end of the semester revealed a lot in terms of what they learned about the teacher's role in discussions. Many expressed a deepened understanding of the teacher's role in balancing chaos and control during discussions of literature, and how mediation with their peers around videotaped discussions facilitated this learning. For example, when I asked Matt, "What experiences during the semester had the most profound impact on how you now think about discussions of literature with your students?" he responded:

I came to realize, through the (videotaped) discussions, that there has to be *some* (emphasis from interviewee) structure in classroom discussions. And the teacher has to provide that structure, but still create space for his students to feel *encouraged* to participate. So I think that's the teacher's main role, to find that balance, but I didn't always see that in the discussions (Matt Interview, page 7).

For Matt, watching his classmates lead discussions of literature allowed him to realize the critical role teachers play in managing productive discussions. Austin, too, talked about the management role teachers play in relation to his peers' videotaped discussions. He explained:

I think in the videos of young teachers, there is always a sense of lack of control, including myself, so I'm . . . I think participating is an important part of that, but also what type of serious intellectual environment is being promoted . . . When you teach, you know when people are engaged and when they are not. And the tapes, too, they showed that. But then, they also showed when students were out of control in the classrooms. And in some of the other tapes, you saw serious intellectual communication during discussions. So the trick is to try and get inside the head of a fifteen or sixteen year-old . . . Ultimately, it comes down to the teacher and his objectives. Do we want students to guide where the discussion takes them? I think I now realize that that's okay, if that's what the teacher is looking to happen in the classroom. But some teachers are not comfortable in allowing that sort of openness in discussions to happen (Austin Interview, p. 2).

Thus, for Matt, Austin, and most of the other interns, conversations with their peers – in this case around the videotaped discussions – allowed them to think substantively about issues of structure, control, chaos, and participation. In talking with their classmates, they deepened their understanding of the teacher's role in discussions. They began to see discussion as a worthwhile teaching strategy if done for the right reasons and with the right amount of teacher participation. These views contrast sharply with their earlier beliefs about the teacher's role, as one where the teacher either stays completely involved, or removes him/herself entirely. Through mediation with their classmates, interns began to see discussions not as black and white, but as shades of gray and interconnected with the teacher's objectives. Stephanie expressed her beliefs about the teacher's role in this way:

I will now often let (discussions) go, if it is a good discussion, and not feel as though I need to necessarily redirect or interrupt. For example, at one point, students watched a film of *Huck Finn*, and afterwards, just starting talking about the film. I could not even get a word in, but since the conversation seemed productive and generative, I did not stop it. But that was also because I was not have a specific objective to meet, but wanted to see what connections the students would make between the film and the text . . . The only time I felt as though I need to stop such discussions were when my mentor teacher was in the room – which was rare – because I knew she wanted to see a bit more direction and teacher involvement (Stephanie Interview, p. 4).

At the end of this chapter, as I did in Chapter Four, I provide the reader with a microanalysis of Stephanie's placement classroom, and how the English methods activity system shaped her teaching. But even in the quotation above, we see a sophisticated verbal response to a very complex issue – that of the teacher's role in discussions. Stephanie then talks about the decision she makes, in the midst of her lesson, to "not stop" the discussion of *Huck Finn*. Again, although I am not suggesting a direct correlation between what the videotaped discussions and Stephanie's practice, I am suggesting that through instances of conversations with the instructor and her classmates, Stephanie deepened her understanding about the teacher's role. Moreover, the videotaped discussions helped to facilitate these conversations.

At the same time, I should point out that not all interns seemed to change their thinking with respect to the teacher's role. Julia, for example, even at the end of the semester, did not seem to believe it was important for teachers to get involved in discussions unless required for disciplinary purposes. She explained, "I just believe that unless students get out of control in discussions, and are not even listening to each other, teachers should just stay out of discussions completely" (Julia Interview, p. 1). From my two observations of Julia's field placement classroom, I knew she was serious about this claim. During a discussion late in the semester, for example, Julia made every effort to stay out of her students' discussion of *The Crucible*. She began class by asking her students to pull two quotes from the play, which would serve as the basis for the discussion. She then had them move into a circle and explained, "I want you to talk to each other, and I am only going to get involved if I need to – in other words, if students are getting out of control or off topic" (Field notes, Julia's classroom, p. 7).

Although Julia said she would intervene if students went “off topic,” she never did, even though the discussion had very little coherence. In fact, the only thing she stated during the entire discussion was, “Too many students are talking,” which she said several times. In contrast to Austin, Matt, and most of her classmates, when Julia talked about the teacher’s role, it was largely focused on procedural behaviors. She seemed to see the teacher as having a fixed set of responsibilities in discussions of literature, rather than seeing the teacher’s role as variable and dynamic depending on goals and circumstances. In her view, which did not change much throughout the semester, the teacher should stay out of discussions and let students speak, apparently irrespective of what the teacher hoped to accomplish.

Where Julia *did* seem to develop was in recognizing the need to prepare students for discussions. In fact, when I asked how, if at all, she might use what she learned in the seminar to inform her own teaching in the fall (presuming she secures a teaching position), she responded, “I would definitely start much earlier in doing discussions, particularly when students are writing and asking most of the questions. (Students) just are not familiar enough with what good questions look like” (Julia Interview, p. 1).

People in (the seminar), I think, expected performance, they wanted to perform participation. And *Preparing Students for Discussions*

With this, I turn to the second theme or lesson that seemed to grow out of conversations around the videotaped discussions: preparing students for discussions. For Julia, preparing students for discussion means helping them understand what it means to write and develop good discussion questions. She explained, “I think teachers need to think as much as possible before the actual discussion, to anticipate things that might

come up, and to spend time helping students write and develop good discussion questions” (Julia Interview, p. 5). Julia’s sentiments not only contrast what she said at the beginning of the semester, but what she did in her field placement classroom even during the final weeks of the semester. In her case, as with other interns, while their thinking about preparing students for discussions may have changed, it was too late to enact these changes in their teaching. Ultimately, perhaps the strongest indication that Julia had grown during the semester came during the end of our interview, when she said, “In the end, regardless of how hard the teacher may have worked on preparing a lesson, the teacher is responsible for how a discussion turns out” (Julia Interview, p. 5).

Several interns expressed this belief at the end of the semester, even though some, like Matt, held a completely opposite view at the beginning of the course. As noted in Chapter Three, Matt initially believed that good discussions of literature were dependent on the level of “self-efficacy of students” (Matt Interview, p. 5). By contrast, at the end of the semester, Matt began to emphasize the critically important roles teachers play in discussions of literature. For example, when I asked him to talk about his beliefs regarding student participation, he explained:

People in (the seminar), I think, expected perfection. They wanted 100 percent participation. And when it didn’t happen, they were so down on themselves that they just, you know, they’d burn out a little bit. And I was guilty of the same thing, but I realized very quickly that you can’t tackle it all in one day. Let’s go back to the old cliché, Rome was not built in a day, take it one step at a time . . . and eventually you are gonna get there. But don’t expect everything overnight (Matt Interview, p. 3).

As Matt points out, he was “guilty” of expecting perfect participation from his students early in the semester. Through conversations with his peers, and by experimenting with various methods and teaching strategies in his field placement classroom, he began to understand *his* role in preparing students for discussions. He realized “very quickly” that it takes time to get students to participate in discussions, and that you can’t expect things to happen “overnight.” While we have no firm way of knowing how mediation with his peers around videotaped discussions shaped Matt’s beliefs, they no doubt played a role. The following excerpt, also from our final interview, offers evidence of this role. During our interview, I asked Matt to share with me an overarching lesson he learned about discussions and the kinds of discussions he wants to lead in the coming years. He replied:

Matt: I think I learned about questions, and the need for teachers to develop questions (in discussions) that move in a general direction . . . I also learned about the need to create a comfortable environment for kids to talk.

Kevin: How do you create that?

Matt: That’s a good question. Um, during my second discussion, I told my students to sit where they like, near their friends, which seemed to help. But setting up a community starts in the beginning of the year, which I plan to do the next time. I got the idea from Emily, who had her students create their own space in her videotape (Matt Interview, p. 4).

As this excerpt suggests, the videotaped discussions created opportunities for interns to borrow ideas from each other. But did interns just arbitrarily borrow ideas? In

this example, did Matt merely observe something that worked in another's videotaped discussion and attempt to replicate the idea in his own classroom? Two sources of data suggest the answer to both of these questions is a resounding "no." First, if we examine the transcript from the class in which Emily shared her videotaped discussion, we see that students initiated conversation around her strategies. The following excerpt begins with Emily contextualizing her lesson:

Emily: This is the product of a lot of work. I've done three discussions already, and I've changed a whole bunch of things . . . All they really have is the prompt sheet, and all I told them is to create their own space during the discussion. What I'm trying to do is make this "conversation" (Emily gestures with her fingers) less classroom-y. I really want it to be a comfortable conversation about their experiences and the text (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*). So that's what I want you to watch for – how and whether they appear comfortable in this environment.

Emily plays the videotape. In it, students are seated in various places around the classroom. Some are at their desks, some are on the floor, and still others are standing. Unused desks are pushed against the back wall, and all students have in their hands is the prompt sheet and a copy of the text they are reading.

Emily: So, in each of my three classes, students took the idea of "student space" very differently. Like in my second hour, they were lying all over each other during the discussion.

Alexis: What were we looking for again?

Emily: Did they seem comfortable? Did it appear they were having a “real” conversation?

Brad: I would say students seemed a little bit shy about things, but that was because it was a bit personal. But there was a lot of encouragement, and so I thought it was a very comfortable environment. And I loved the set-up of your classroom.

Maggie: How long have you been working with setting up this kind of classroom space?

Emily: It’s taken some time, that’s for sure. Um, ever since we got back from break, but I’ve been doing more and more to get students to take ownership of their classroom.

In the above excerpt, Emily and her classmates mediate around her videotaped discussion. By providing the context for a post-discussion conversation – namely, creating student space – students are quickly able to engage meaningfully with and around the videotaped discussion. And although the conversation begins with a focus on student space and what teachers can do to help students feel more comfortable during discussions (of literature or otherwise), it eventually moves in numerous other directions. In the above excerpt, Emily begins to talk about the work she has done prior to the lesson in the videotape. This discussion, combined with others, helps interns continue to realize that discussions do not just happen; rather, they require thoughtful, deliberate effort on the part of teachers.

A second data source in response to the above questions comes from my interview with Matt. At one point, not in specific response to any particular question, Matt shared, “In general, my beliefs on discussions are completely different now than they were back then (at the start of the semester)” (Matt Interview, p. 5). But I wanted to know more, so I pressed Matt to think and talk more about how his experiences in the English methods seminar may have shaped or influenced these shifts in thinking. He replied, “I’m not sure the course did things on a conscious level, but more of a subconscious way of helping me to think about discussions. It was really more of a gradual evolution than anything sudden” (Matt Interview, p. 5).

Combined, the class transcript and Matt’s response to my question above suggest that learning in the seminar was a culminating type of experience. That is, mediating tools – in this case the videotaped discussions – provided a context and purpose for larger conversations about discussions and the teacher’s role in leading them. As interns and their instructor engaged in mediation and discussion with each other in the context of the videotaped discussions, they drew on a range of other experiences to shape their input and ideas. By showing the class what she meant by “creating student space,” Emily provided the opportunity for Matt and the rest of the interns to ask questions themselves about their classroom environments. In this way, mediation around the videotaped discussions pushed interns to think in substantive ways about preparing students – cognitively as well as affectively – to participate in discussions.

Beliefs About Socio-culturally Diverse Students

Finally, I turn to interns' beliefs about students from social, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds that contrasted with their own. As I described in Chapter Two, six of the eight interns in this study taught in schools that looked quite different from their own experiences in terms of student diversity. Only two interns – Julia and Kathy – taught in schools that, by their own testimony, felt like their own school experiences. Of the other six interns, only one of them, Emily, taught in what was considered a non-traditional school. In order to get accepted into Redwood High School, students were required to take and pass a strict entrance examination. Thus, Emily's students did not reflect as wide a range of academic abilities and experiences as the other five interns' students. In fact, most if not all of her students were high-achieving individuals who had a history of success in school. Redwood High School was also less diverse than the other five schools, as 95 percent of its students were of African-American descent.

I point all of this out for a couple different reasons. The first is to note that, unlike discussion, which was a central and therefore common focus in the English methods seminar, interns' experiences with diversity varied widely. They therefore had different opportunities to think about and/or challenge beliefs about students from diverse backgrounds. Only five interns – Steve, Austin, Matt, Stephanie, and Alexis – taught in culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse schools, and therefore confronted issues of diversity on a daily basis.

The second reason is to note that, although diversity took a back seat to conversations about the teacher's role in discussions of literature, the data suggest it was on interns' minds. In other words, interns' varied experiences in their respective field

placement classrooms shaped and were shaped by what they learned from each other about discussions. In the following paragraphs, I focus on two interns – Alexis and Steve – to describe and explain this relationship. In particular, I show how mediation around the videotaped discussions influenced interns' beliefs about culturally, socially, and/or linguistically diverse students.

As discussed in the final pages of Chapter Three, interns entered the semester (and likely the teacher education program) with relatively fixed beliefs about students of color and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. In general, although they often used language to camouflage these beliefs, they generally held lower expectations for what they and/or their diverse students could accomplish than with students from predominantly white, middle-class communities. Martin Haberman (1987), as well as others (examples here), have shown this to be a common perception among white, middle-class pre-service teachers. As Alexis said during our interview:

In the beginning, I had a really tough group of kids, I thought. They didn't want to turn in their homework, they didn't want to participate in class, they didn't want to be quiet. With those type of students, I thought, how can I even have a discussion, you know? They won't even sit in their seats! They can't even be quiet long enough to listen to my question, let alone to a classmate without telling them to 'shut-up'! (Alexis Interview, page 6).

Although Alexis does not explicitly talk about expectations, her language suggests that she believes ability – rather than lack of experience – is why her students cannot participate in discussions. She very specifically identifies what her students

cannot, will not, and do not do, all of which suggests incapability. At one point, she even refers to her students as “those type of students” who “can’t even be quiet long enough to listen to my question.” Although any effort here to interpret meaning here would be purely speculative, her language certainly raises several questions and concerns. Of course, given what Alexis shared with me during our interview, the statement above is not particularly surprising. During our interview, she talked about a teacher she had and respected when she was herself a student in a high school English classroom:

Mr. Hanson . . . is sort of an eclectic type of teacher. He’s been there for a long time. I would have loved to be in his class as a student teacher. You know, he was just, he was very smart, knew everything. So I observed him (during student teaching) and afterwards we talked about his classes and his students . . . I asked him about the state of Lincoln schools and we started talking about the ghettoization of our schools and how you have this lower-level, you know, lower-income level students coming into the classroom. And he said, which really made me think, he said something about, that they just don’t want an education, they don’t want to be educated. Whereas (he continued) you have students from . . . Okemos, or other higher, more middle-class families, um, who desire that education, and it’s important to them . . . (Alexis Interview, p. 7).

Although these words come more from Mr. Hanson than they do Alexis, the two share similar beliefs about the capabilities of poor students and students of color. According to Mr. Hanson as well as Alexis, the teacher holds little power or control over the fate of his or her students. More importantly, the responsibility for teaching and

learning – and facilitating effective discussions of literature – falls squarely onto students’ shoulders. Upon entering the English methods seminar, this was largely what Alexis believed in terms of discussions, and in terms of the students she had come to know in her multicultural, middle school language arts class. But through mediation around videotaped discussions from her own as well as her classmates’ field placement classrooms, Alexis began to deepen her understanding of the teacher’s role. She began to see more what students brought to the classroom, rather than what they did not. And finally, she began to challenge her prior beliefs about the capabilities of students whose backgrounds and experiences were different from her own.

But how did all of this happen? And what role did the videotaped discussions play in facilitating these changes? To address these questions, I offer the following excerpted transcript from a class session of the seminar, which transpired late in the semester. Although this session was not the only one in which beliefs about students served to fuel the discussion, it powerfully illustrates the transformative learning potential of videotaped lessons that are accompanied by student-driven mediation. Prior to this discussion, the class watches Scott attempt to lead what he calls a discussion. From what we see in the videotaped discussion, along with what he shared, the students are very similar in age, ethnicity and socio-cultural background to the students in Alexis’ field placement classroom. Although Scott calls the lesson a discussion, he speaks 95 percent of the time, and not once during the lesson do students look or speak to another student. Alexis initiates the debriefing:

Alexis: I just covered the same material (*Belle Prater’s Boy*) in my class, so that was just very interesting. I was especially interested in some of the questions you

asked in the discussion, um, that may have led students to answer one way and not another.

Scott: What do you mean? I'm not clear.

Alexis: Well, I think you focused on "what" or "who" or "where" questions, which students could respond to in only one or two words. I think you need to ask more "why" questions . . . For example, I asked my students, "Why does the author have a character in the story like Amos Leemaster? Why is that character in this book?" And so the kids began to explore that question, they thought about possibilities, they talked with each other. There was a lot going on, because it was more than just, "Who did this? When? Where?"

Scott: Right.

Alexis: So I think it's your questioning. You gotta leave them open-ended . . .

Scott: And the thing is, about a week ago when some seniors came in to do their placement, they led the class in some open-ended questions, but my students seemed to forget all about that, and just got quiet when we did this lesson.

Alexis: But you've got to remind them. Remember when the students from Middletown University came in? Remember what we talked about? What happened? You know?

Jason: I think what's interesting here is the difference between high school and middle school, and how you led them in really more of a recitation. Your kids were actually responding. If I were to throw a question like that to my students, they would just stare at me. I could give them the easiest question in the world – the easier the question, the worse the responses from the students. But it forces me

to come up with questions like “Why?” I don’t know if it’s high school kids or it’s just my kids, but they will *not* do recitation. But if you ask them a question like, “What do you think?” then, you know, they’ll give it a shot. So I wonder if that’s a level difference or –

Scott: I think it’s a classroom difference. I have another classroom of 31 kids and they, they’re all about the “why” questions, they don’t like recitations, so I think it’s more class to class differences.

Alexis: And your class was *quiet*! I don’t know how, like today, that’s why I gave my discussion a thumbs-down, because I had like six kids here, six kids there, and like the one girl who is making all these good points, I want to like throw her up in the air, but no one is listening to what she is saying. And I was like, “You know, you folks really missed on some really neat stuff. Aviance had some really good points to share, but no one was listening to what she had to say.” But I still say it’s about questioning, and the kinds of questions you ask, if your goal is to have students participate.

Alexis’ comments in this excerpt sharply contrast her earlier claims about what students can and cannot do. After watching Scott fail in his attempt to lead a discussion, Alexis says nothing about Scott’s students, but places full responsibility on the teacher. She begins by critiquing Scott’s approach to questions, and suggests that unless teachers ask “why” questions, they will not fully engage students. Thus, through watching this classmate lead a discussion around a text with which she is very familiar, Alexis is able to understand the teacher’s role from a more objective perspective. In watching this

videotaped lesson, it becomes clear to Alexis that Scott, and not his students, is ultimately responsible for the failed “discussion.”

After Alexis’ initial critique, Scott shares that he, too, was surprised at his students’ lack of participation. He explains that just one week earlier, a group of seniors from Middletown came to his classroom and taught his students how to respond to open-ended questions. Alexis quickly responds, “But you’ve got to remind them!” Here again, in contrast to her earlier beliefs about “those” students, Alexis places blame squarely on her colleague’s shoulders. Moreover, she seems to understand that just because students hear something once does not mean they will never forget. Rather, she seems to imply that the role of the teacher is to develop and present multiple opportunities for students to learn and understand.

Towards the end of the above excerpt, another student, Jason, contemplates his role in discussions after hearing what his classmates have to say. At first, he rhetorically asks if some of the problems have to do with age or grade level. Through thinking aloud, in the context of Scott’s videotaped discussion, Jason concludes that easy questions will lead to unproductive discussions. If teachers truly want to engage their students in talking about literature, they must “come up with questions like *Why?*” Jason’s contribution prompts Scott to think about his other classes, and whether the issue has more to do with the composition of students than the teacher’s questions. Alexis responds with a story from her own class earlier that day, and ultimately concludes, “I still say it’s about questioning, and the kinds of questions you ask, if your goal is to have students participate.”

Eventually, because another student is ready to present her videotaped discussion, mediation around Scott's videotaped discussion begins to wind down. Before it does, however, Alexis offers a final perspective on the role of the teacher in discussions. This time, she responds to Penni, who asked whether or not the seating arrangement had anything to do with Scott's failure to lead an engaging discussion. Alexis responds:

Alexis: We've done that. We went to circles and, as you guys saw our first discussion, I thought it was very productive, even if they can be a bit chaotic. In the most recent case, we did small groups, we did some pre-writing, but I think in the end my questions were too difficult for them, and so they weren't able to really participate. I think teachers have to scaffold students' participation in discussions. I did that . . . we looked at an essay (my students) had read before, and we talked about it and the message of that essay, and then talked about how a novel is really the same thing, just longer (Class Transcript, p. 42-43, April 3, 2003).

Alexis' closing remarks suggest she has grown and learned in substantive ways over the semester. Mediation around Scott's videotaped discussion not only allows us to hear what she has learned, but forces her to articulate her thoughts, and lets her classmates in on her thinking. In her final response above, she talks about the teacher's role and her students in a very different way than she believed early in the semester. Here, she talks about the teacher's role in preparing students for discussions not only in the minutes before a class discussion (for example, small groups and pre-writing activities), but also in preparing students to understand what it means to talk about a

novel. Unlike earlier, when she talked about what her students “didn’t” or “can’t” or “won’t” do, she now sees them as individuals who have not yet had the necessary experiences to allow them to fully participate in discussions.

Although mediation with her peers allowed Alexis opportunities to challenge her existing beliefs about students, it would be inaccurate to say she learned to completely transformed her thinking. At one point during our interview, I asked her whether watching videotaped discussions at the high school level was as useful as watching lessons from middle school, such as Scott’s discussion (Alexis, remember, also taught middle school students). She responded, “Some of the things they did in the higher grade levels, I couldn’t (do that). Plus, I had completely different kids. My students were completely different from, like, June’s²⁹ kids. So I could not, um, set things up like her. My students had a really hard time thinking on their own” (Interview, p. 3).

Despite the changes we see in Alexis in the earlier excerpts, her response above suggests she still seems to hold the view that students in diverse, urban schools have different capabilities than students in more affluent, suburban schools. Other interns, like Steve, talked in similar ways about students and their understanding of the teacher’s role in discussions. That is, while mediation with their peers around the videotaped discussions (and other tools) allowed them to see the teacher’s role in broader terms, many interns continued to see discrepancies between urban and suburban schools in terms of what could be achieved in discussions of literature. To illustrate some of these differences, I quote Steve at length. The last question I asked of him during our interview

²⁹ As noted in earlier chapters, June taught in a rather affluent, predominantly white suburban community and school that was markedly different from many of her peers in terms of the socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic background of students from Lincoln city schools.

was simply this: “Do you have any final thoughts on the English methods seminar you’d like to share?” He responded:

Steve: Too much emphasis on discussions. Too many reports and research on discussions, when it’s really like, what actually *works* in the classroom. I mean, some things take a lot of time to evolve, and so you have to as a teacher just see things as a whole, over the entire school year . . . I think, you know, we all come from different schools – urban, suburban, middle, high. And we had all these divergent views, “My discussion went well” and “My discussion did this,” when in fact some of these ideas, like what June did at Howard (High School), won’t work (at my school) because kids are a lot different here. Those things won’t work here! I mean, once people started talking, it was like, “That doesn’t apply to me!” So I think maybe if they had structured it so that urban schools were together, and then suburban schools were together, we would have learned a lot more about leading discussions – like, four different sections – middle/secondary, urban/suburban. You know, you hear all these success stories which makes you feel like you are doing things wrong, when maybe it’s just that we are in different settings (Steve Interview, p. 13).

For Steve, the videotaped discussions were not as useful as they could have been had the instructor (or perhaps the Middletown University teacher education program) divided students into groups according to grade level (middle or secondary), or setting (urban or suburban). Thus, although he and Alexis and most of his classmates expanded their understanding of the teacher’s role in preparing students to participate in

discussions, most continued to see differences based on student populations. As noted in the opening paragraphs of this section, one very likely reason for this was the lack of specific focus or attention in the course on issues of student diversity. In other words, because the focus was on discussions of literature, mediation with each other around the videotaped discussions did not address in substantive ways the differences interns may have observed between middle and high school students and urban and suburban settings. As a consequence, although they experienced some growth in these areas, they did not experience substantive change in the ways they did with preparing students for and leading discussions.

In the final chapter, I address this and other issues related to the preparation of teachers for diverse urban schools. For now, it seems enough to say that absent deliberate, meaningful mediation around a specific aspect of teaching, pre-service teachers are not likely to challenge or change their beliefs. When such opportunities are present, as the following case will illustrate, student-initiated mediation can have a potent impact on beginning teacher learning, in this case around leading discussions of literature.

The Case of Stephanie

In Chapter Four, I offered a case study of one intern – Austin – to illustrate how mediation around textual artifacts shaped and were shaped by interns' field placement experiences. In the paragraphs that follow, I present the case of Stephanie to illustrate how the videotaped discussions influenced her teaching practice, and vice versa. In Stephanie's case, two central themes emerge from the data, which happen to interrelate.

The first is Stephanie's expanded understanding of the teacher's role in actively facilitating discussions of literature. The second is her development in understanding and meeting the needs of students different from herself in terms of race, social class, or cultural-linguistic background in discussions.

Stephanie completed her teaching internship in a very diverse high school English classroom. As noted in an earlier chapter, Stephanie began the English methods seminar with the belief that, when it came to discussions of literature, students "would just talk, they wouldn't need much prompting" (Stephanie Interview, p. 6). As the last couple of chapters have illustrated, through mediation with her classmates around textual artifacts and videotaped discussions, Stephanie and her classmates developed a more complex understanding of the teacher's role. But what did this look like in Stephanie's field placement classroom? Moreover, (how) did Stephanie bring her field placement experiences into mediation with her classmates? And finally, (how) did discussions with her classmates around the videotaped discussions facilitate her knowledge and practice of leading discussions? In the next several paragraphs, I address these and related questions.

In Chapter Four, I described the first discussion I observed Stephanie "lead" in her field placement classroom. In that discussion, Stephanie spoke a total of three times, including once at the beginning of her lesson. She told her students, "I am not going to say anything in this discussion. You are going to ask each other the questions you wrote down, and talk about them with each other" (Videotaped discussion, 2/2/03).

As with many of her classmates early in the semester, Stephanie believed that open discussions meant the teacher completely removed him/herself from the conversation. But for Stephanie, an additional factor played a role in her removal: her

lack of knowledge of her students' cultural backgrounds and experiences (Sarah Interview, pp. 2-3). This was particularly true when they talked about sensitive issues such as race and racism. In the discussion of Toni Morrison's (2000) *The Bluest Eye*, for example, students began talking about the relationship between skin tone in the African-American community and proximity to "whiteness." Although her class was racially mixed, Stephanie said nothing substantive during or immediately after the discussion. The reason, she later explained to me, was that she "had no previous experience" with students from racial or cultural backgrounds other than her own.

In addition to this issue, which I return to shortly, the discussion itself was problematic in terms of coherence and continuity. Although many of the students' questions were quite thoughtful, the lack of uptake and in-depth analysis rendered them useless. Below is a brief excerpt from the discussion, offered to provide a sense of how things transpired during the lesson. This excerpt comes approximately five minutes into the discussion.

Marcus: Um, why, um, why do y'all think the girls did not like Rosemary?

Lateesha: 'Cause she was lighter, she had a lighter skin tone. And because she tattle-taled on them –

Samantha: Yeah, that's what I was gonna say. Because she told on them.

David: (after a long pause) What is Frieda and Claudia's dad's name?

Candace: Yeah, what is his name –

Jeremy: I don't think they said it, did they? (At this point, several students try to speak at the same time as they argue about whether or not the book ever mentioned the father's name. No conclusion is reached.)

Ashley: (again after a long silence) Okay, I've got one: Why do you think Maureen brought up the topic of nakedness, and why do you think the girls reacted the way they did?

Like the first two questions, this last one, while seemingly engaging and potentially productive, engenders little uptake or discussion during the lesson. One or two students respond to it, after which a different student reads his/her question, again with little or no relevance to the previous conversation. For about 35 minutes, the discussion progressed in this manner, with little or no continuity or coherence. At the end of the class, Stephanie congratulated her students on a "good discussion," and then talked about assignments that were due in the coming days and weeks. After class, I asked if she really believed they did a good job during the discussion, and if so, what made her say so. She replied, "I thought they asked really good questions!" (Field placement notes, 2/2/03).

In the weeks following this lesson, as described earlier in this chapter, Stephanie had multiple opportunities to watch her classmates lead discussions of literature in their placement classrooms. After each videotaped lesson, she talked and listened to her fellow interns as they struggled to figure out what it means to lead a discussion, the role teachers should play, and how these roles might change depending on the context and grade level of one's students, if at all. During my final interview with Stephanie, I asked her about the videotaped discussions, and how, if at all, they helped her to think about her own practice of leading discussions of literature. She responded:

They really helped me to get ideas, so that I could say, "This is what I wanna try"
... I think just having the opportunity to interact with my peers, to learn what

they were doing in their classrooms and compare that to what I was doing in mine, to share ideas and lesson plans with others. I think that helped a lot. Just seeing what they are doing, and then I could try it, and they could do the same and see if something works. I know Matt, for example, used an entire unit plan of mine (Stephanie Interview, p. 3).

At the very least, the videotaped discussions apparently helped Stephanie to think about different strategies for leading discussions, to see what “works.” It also provided her and her classmates with an occasion to swap materials and resources. As she later explained, this was particularly true when interns taught in the same or similar schools in terms of curriculum and diversity of the student population. And although this was these were the only references Stephanie made to the videotaped discussions during our interview, other data suggest she learned other things through them as well. For example, for her final paper for the English methods seminar, Stephanie was instructed to describe and explain her research question, and what she learned about discussions over the semester. Following is an excerpt from that analysis:

After watching the video of my second *The Bluest Eye* discussion in our course, I realized that some students might be very uncomfortable speaking in class in general . . . In my excitement to have open student-led discussions in the classroom, I neglected to (realize) that there are students who are very shy and those who have issues outside the classroom that make it more difficult for them to participate. I know I did when I was their age, and it has taken me years to reach the level of comfort I’m currently at as far as participating in class goes.

Initially, I had mandated that every student participate with at least one comment during each whole-class discussion. I had always given students the opportunity to meet with small discussion groups and take notes prior to the whole-class discussion, so I did not feel that asking for one comment from each student was asking too much.

After listening to my own peers when I showed this video in our class, and after reading through my narratives, I decided to change my rules just a little bit. One of the suggestions I'd received from one of my classmates was to allow students who are really apprehensive about speaking out in class to write a summary of their thoughts as they relate to the discussion. This is an assignment that is very similar to what I would give to students who were absent on the day of a large discussion, and so I thought, why not? I did not make the announcement of this alternate assignment out loud to the entire class though, because I was afraid that nobody would want to discuss anymore. Instead, I told the non-participating students individually that they would have this option if they chose to use it (Discussion Analysis Paper, p. 2).

As this excerpt clearly illustrates, mediation with her classmates around the videotaped discussions – her own as well as others – helped Stephanie to rethink and thereby deepen her understanding of the teacher's role in discussions. Specifically, conversations around the videotaped discussions allowed Stephanie to expand her conception of student participation, and to draw on her own experiences in order to

understand what her students might be experiencing. Through watching her students, drawing on these experiences, and talking and listening to her classmates, Stephanie began to question beliefs she had not even realized needed to be questioned. In this sense, mediation around the videotaped discussions offered interns more than ideas and strategies that might “work” in leading discussions. They created opportunities for student to re-conceptualize the essence of discussions for their particular needs and contexts. For Stephanie, these conversations with her classmates had a powerful impact on her teaching practice.

Three weeks before the end of the semester, I had my second and final opportunity to observe Stephanie lead a discussion in her field placement classroom. Her students had read John Steinbeck’s (1993) *Of Mice and Men*. In this discussion, in sharp contrast to the first one I observed, Stephanie was an engaged, active participant. Although most of the questions still came from her students, this time they focused on a particular theme – the pursuit of the American Dream. After the discussion, I asked Stephanie how – if at all – she had prepared her students in the days leading up to the lesson. She explained to me that because she had wanted to focus on the American dream, she had her students work in groups to develop questions around the meaning of this theme as presented in the novel (Field placement notes, 4/10/02). Even her lesson plan noted her objective, “To examine the potential costs and benefits of pursuing the American dream” (Stephanie lesson plan, 4/10/02).

In addition to preparing students for a more coherent and focused discussion, Stephanie’s participation *during* the discussion also differed from the first one I observed. In the latter discussion, if and when her students did not fully engage with each others’

questions and responses, Stephanie asked follow-up questions. And when she did, it was in a way that encouraged students to talk to each other, rather than merely answer her questions. In one example, one of Stephanie's students raises a question about Crooks, and why he buys into the main characters' – Lennie and George – fantasy of owning a farm with rabbits and acres of gardens. When a student offers a quick, literal response, Stephanie pushed him to say more about what he means. He does, and three additional students follow with their views on the topic. In this way, although Stephanie still said very little during the discussion, she played a very active role in how it progressed.

Finally, the data suggest that, through a combination of the videotaped discussions and her field placement experiences, Stephanie dramatically changed her beliefs about her students. Unlike early in the semester, when Stephanie “had no previous experience” with culturally or racially diverse students, she eventually came to respect, value, and use what her students brought into the classroom. Although much of this came through direct experience with her students, significant conceptual change came through mediation with her classmates around the videotaped discussions. Perhaps the most effective way to illustrate the relationship between these is to offer the following excerpt from our interview at the end of the semester. I asked Stephanie, “How, if at all, has your perception of your students changed over the semester with respect to discussions of literature?” Here was her response, along with my follow-up question:

Stephanie: Well, um, I'm gonna talk about the sophomores; because I knew they were honors kids and were gonna do okay. Maureen (her mentor teacher) told me from the beginning that my sophomores were not gonna be able to have a discussion, that I shouldn't even try, and all this stuff. So when I first started, I

was very, very structured, and used very, very easy questions because that's all I thought they could handle, based on what my mentor had told me, cause I had no previous experience with these kids. But as time went on, I was like, you know what, I think my mentor is wrong. They're sixteen years old, and they can answer questions! What is she talking about? I got really mad . . . now, I get so mad when people talk about what kids at urban schools can and cannot do.

Kevin: So, how did you react to some of the conversations in the seminar that dealt with what students can and cannot do?

Stephanie: You know, I thought we brought up some really good stuff in those conversations. I just think that a lot of us believe that all students can do things – there aren't necessarily a group of students who can't do something. So I took that attitude with me into my placement and just believed that students could do whatever I wanted them to do . . . I think being able to talk about things makes (our learning) a lot more effective. I mean, there were times when I went into (class) and I was pulling out my hair because of things my mentor was doing, so having people to talk to was good (Stephanie Interview, pp. 5-6).

Although Stephanie does not specifically mention the videotaped discussions, the “conversations” she refers to take place in the context of them. The conversation presented earlier, around Scott's videotaped discussion, is one such example. In that discussion, Scott seemed unwilling to take responsibility for not leading an effective, engaging discussion. He believed his students were to blame. But several of his classmates, including Alexis, help him to see how students need to be taught how to

participate in discussions. They help him to see that just because students have not had experience in discussions does not mean they are not capable of having them.

Conversations like that one, among many others, helped Stephanie to see her students for what they brought into the classroom rather than what they did not, in spite of her mentor teacher's negative beliefs about students.

The excerpted transcript above suggests Stephanie experienced a dramatic change in thinking with regard to students in urban schools. Whereas she began the semester knowing very little about her students' cultural backgrounds and experiences, she eventually came to see and understand their full strengths and potential. What seems significant about this change is how it came about, and the obstacles she had to overcome – in particular, her mentor teacher. One might speculate that if not for conversations with her classmates, Stephanie might never have developed such positive views of her students. By the end of the semester, she has not only learned to see her students in positive terms, but gets “mad when people talk about what urban students can and cannot do” (Stephanie Interview, p. 6).

The data presented above and earlier suggest that while interns' may hold deficit or negative views about students in diverse, urban schools, these views are not intractable. Through rich conversations with their peers, particularly in the context of mediating artifacts such as videotaped discussions, change is not only possible but quite achievable. Moreover, change is not limited to beliefs about students. For Stephanie, mediation with her peers around the videotaped discussions taught her to develop a more thoughtful conception of participation. This mediation also helped her to realize that discussions must be linked to specific goals and objectives if they are to be effective and

engaging for students. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, mediation around the videotaped discussions helped Stephanie to develop a complex yet clear understanding of her role in leading discussions of literature. In the following chapter, I turn to a third central mediating tool, Stacey's own pedagogy, and the role it played in shaping intern learning throughout the semester.

CHAPTER SIX

INSTRUCTOR PEDAGOGY AS A MEDIATING TOOL

In the two previous chapters, I described and explained how mediation around specific tools – textual artifacts and videotaped discussions – deepened interns’ understanding of discussions and their role in leading them. In this chapter, I focus on a less tangible but equally powerful mediating tool – Stacey’s pedagogy. But let me first say this: The distinction between Stacey’s pedagogy and the tools she incorporate *into* her teaching is tenuous at best. In a sense, they are one in the same, and cannot be separated from each other. However, for analytic purposes, I focus in this chapter on mediation in response to Stacey’s pedagogy *beyond or apart from* the textual artifacts or videotaped discussions. Although some of the data in this chapter will reference these other tools, the focus will be what interns seemed to learn from and through Stacey’s pedagogical approach. Specifically, the two aspects of her teaching I will consider are: 1) her emphasis on discussions throughout the semester, and 2) her pedagogy as a model and tool for mediation.

A Focus on Discussions

It would be misleading if I did not explicitly state that the most salient feature of the English methods seminar in terms of fostering teacher learning was its focus on discussions of literature. The mere fact that discussions were emphasized in the course played a considerable role in helping interns to learn more about them. Of the 16 class meetings during the semester, 11 were almost entirely dedicated to discussions of

literature. Given this emphasis, it is quite possible that even without the opportunities described in previous chapters, interns would have learned *something* about discussions. While this may be the case, my aim in the following section is to show how the organization of the course, coupled with this emphasis, provided unique opportunities for interns to think and talk about discussions in thoughtful, productive ways.

Time and Space to Think and Talk

During the first few weeks of the semester, Stacey helped her students develop research questions around discussions, which they would use in their field placement classrooms. From mid-February through the mid-April, for about eight weeks, students presented and then talked about their videotaped discussions from their field placement classrooms. Stacey's decision to emphasize discussions of literature created an atmosphere in which interns thoughts and ideas could percolate become more clear and refined. In this sense, the course was not designed like most English methods courses, where students quickly move from one topic to the next – what Smagorinsky calls the “smorgesborg” approach to methods courses. Instead, week after week, the focus was on discussions. Even if they wanted to, interns could not avoid talking, or at least thinking about them.

As interns shared with me during our interviews at the end of the semester, Stacey's decision to focus on discussions played an instrumental role in their development as teachers. It allowed them multiple points of entry into the conversation around discussions. It created an environment in the class in which nearly every idea about teaching or learning was related to discussions. As Alexis remarked:

We spent the entire semester talking about discussions – that was helpful, just talking about them and having it be a focus, um, is important! (Alexis Interview, p. 12).

Alexis and her classmates recognized the value of thinking and talking about discussions from multiple perspectives. But how, and in what ways? In my interview with Matt, he shared that it was not so much on a conscious level that he learned about discussions, but “more of a subconscious way of helping (me) to think about discussions. More of a gradual evolution than anything else” (Matt Interview, p. 5). In other words, understanding more about the teacher’s role in discussions was not something that “happened” one day in the seminar. Rather, it happened over time, gradually, by and through numerous overlapping experiences and interactions among members of the activity system, including the teacher.

Although Matt describes his learning as a “subconscious” and “gradual” process, he is not likely aware of the parallels to socio-cultural theories of learning, such as activity theory (Engestrom, 19xx). Steve, too, talked about the value of discussions of literature as a focal point for the course. He also talked about the challenges, and how his learning was augmented because of what he did and tried in his field placement classroom. He explained:

I think, like, when (my classmates) talk about leading discussions, we just need each other people who understand what you do in your profession, and then just talk about it . . . we as students brought our experiences and frustrations to the [English methods seminar] which made it such that we could discuss things that

we wanted to discuss, and it was not just talking in theory, but conversations based on real-life things that were happening to us in our field placements (Steve Interview, p. 9).

Steve points out a key element of the English methods activity system: interns' field placement classrooms. As Chapter Five illustrated, interns were required to lead and videotape discussions of literature in their field placement classrooms, and then share these discussions with their peers. But these were not single-purpose assignments. Rather, they were connected to the larger goals of the course, which focused on interns developing an understanding of discussions. As a result, interns could not simply complete tasks and assignments and then move on. They were forced to embrace the challenges, the nuances, and the questions that arose in the process of leading discussions in their field placement classrooms.

Week after week, they brought new layers of challenges and frustrations, as well as surprises and successes, to the seminar. They discussed and share their experiences with each other, and learned from them, individually as well as collectively. Through emphasizing discussions of literature, and creating space and time to delve into related issues, Stacey encouraged her students to be patient with themselves and their learning. What they learned from their English methods course, they took into their placement classrooms, and vice versa. But this was only possible because the entire semester was dedicated to discussions of literature, and the teacher's role in facilitating effective discussions with students. In my interview with Kathy, she talked about how these experiences helped her to learn and grow. She explained:

I think there were things that got brought up in the English methods seminar that maybe I never would have thought of on my own. But collectively, as a group, we figured it out together. Um, the discussions we had on discussions, if it weren't for the discussions I had with my peers, there would have been lots of things that wouldn't have clicked in for me about discussions with students (Kathy Interview, p. 2).

As Kathy's remarks suggest, mediation in the weekly seminar was not a linear process. Rather, students (and the teacher) "figured (things) out together." What students brought to each class and what they felt like talking about varied from week to week. Stacey's only expectations were that students focus on discussions of literature in the context of the literature they read, the videotaped discussions, or their field placement experiences. But this raises another question: Given interns' wide range of concerns and experiences, how was the instructor able to help students on an individual level? To address this concern, I turn again to Kathy, who said, "I think the focus on discussions helped. Because, like, instead of looking at entire picture of discussions, I think we were able, each of us individually, to find our own focus on discussions, and then pull together what we learned" (Kathy Interview, p. 4).

What Kathy seems to suggest here is that even though each intern focused on a different research question, and encountered different challenges in their field placement classrooms, they came together and learned from these experiences because of Stacey's focus on discussions. Later in my interview with Kathy, she talked specifically about what learned through this process. She said, "I think Stacey and my peers helped me to

understand what a discussion is, what my role in a discussion is, how to write discussion questions, and that sort of stuff” (Kathy Interview, p. 6). In short, because of the focus in the English methods seminar on discussions of literature, Kathy and her classmates had ample opportunities to engage with whatever aspects of discussions interested or challenged them, individually as well as collectively.

This focus on discussions had implications for learning beyond as well as within the walls of the seminar. Engestrom (1999) argues that development occurs across boundaries – vertical and horizontal as well as intellectual and practical. He further explains, “Human nature is not found within the human individual but in the movement between the inside and outside, in the world of artifact use and artifact creation” (p. 5). In my interview with Austin, he talked about the ways in which he and his classmates talked about discussions and Stacey’s pedagogy outside the boundaries of the classroom:

I learned through Stacey and the others that discussions aren’t going to just *happen* . . . As Steve probably mentioned to you, he and I got together to eat on Wednesday nights and generally talked about things from class, like what Stacey did or what happened in the videotaped discussions . . . I think I learned a lot through other people, just what other people said, listening to things, learning things myself that helped me to learn *about* myself. Like, Stacey would do or say something, and I would think to myself, “Am I that way? ‘Cause I don’t know if that’s right!” And just negotiating those things in my mind (Austin Interview, p. 3).

As Austin points out, Stacey's pedagogy – like the videotaped discussions – provided opportunities to negotiate the meaning of discussions with his classmates. He watched what Stacey did, thought about its implications for his own teaching, and shared these ideas with others. Above, he talks about how he and Steve would get together and talk about “what Stacey did,” suggesting that interns did not restrict their learning to the seminar setting. Rather, he and Steve used Stacey's pedagogy as a source of mediation and learning. Moreover, he and Steve did this not because they had to, or because it was an assignment, but because it was on their mind and they wanted to figure things out. Other interns, including Emily and Danielle, had similar experiences. In my interview with Emily, she talked about the 75 mile drive to Lincoln from Denton, where they lived and taught. She explained:

I think that if Middletown University is going to require students to drive from Denton, they should require partners, because when (Danielle and I) were not talking about Danielle's boyfriend, we would talk about education, or things that happened in (the English methods seminar) like something Stacey did or something from the videotaped discussions. Sometimes, we would even get into fights about things, and would not end up talking to each other until the next day . . . We're both very different people, but we definitely learned a lot from each other, and talked about things that we talked about in the seminar (Emily Interview, p. 7).

As this and the previous excerpt point out, conversations about discussions were not confined to the seminar classroom. Moreover, one gets the sense from Emily as well

as Austin that not only did they talk about issues from the English methods seminar, they were much more passionate in conversations that happened outside of class. Austin seems to take more ownership in his learning, while Emily and Danielle “get into fights” about what they learned through and from the seminar. This data, combined with the earlier examples in this section, suggest that a focus on discussions provided a rich context for authentic, meaningful dialogue about discussions. It allowed interns to engage in mediation with each other when it worked for them, or when it applied to their unique field placement experiences. In this sense, Stacey’s emphasis on discussions very powerfully contributed to interns’ understanding of discussions. But as the following section will suggest, not all interns felt this way all of the time.

Too Much Emphasis on Discussions?

Although Kathy, Austin, Emily, and most of their classmates seemed to benefit from the focus on discussions, some questioned Stacey’s approach to the course. Alexis, for example, did not believe as Kathy did that the wide range of unique issues helped her learn and develop. She explained, “I had completely different kids. My students were completely different from, like, June’s kids . . . so I couldn’t always take much from (the discussions) we had in class” (Alexis Interview, p. 3). Although she did not elaborate on what she meant by “different,” the implication is that because June taught in a suburban school, and Alexis taught in an urban school, Alexis could not learn much from the discussions. Of course, as I have demonstrated in earlier chapters, Alexis actually learned a lot from and through her classmates, most of which was made possible given the emphasis on discussions in the course.

In terms of the focus on discussions, Steve expressed a slightly different concern and perspective. Near the end of our interview, I asked him to give me his overall assessment of the English methods seminar. He replied, "Discussions aren't the be-all and end-all they are made out to be . . . so they may have put too much emphasis on them in the class" (Steve Interview, p. 11). Like Alexis, Steve learned a great deal about discussions through mediation with his peers around the course tools. But apparently he did not see a connection between this learning and the emphasis on discussions. Moreover, he seemed to read the focus on discussions as suggesting that discussions were the most important teaching strategy for English education.

And finally, when I asked Julia some of these same questions, including her overall assessment of the course, and how discussions were handled, she responded:

It was interesting to hear what other people were doing in their field placements, because it kind of gave you some different ideas you might try out. But I really felt like I was just kinda doing this in the dark . . . everyone's situation was so different, it didn't seem to help that much (Julia Interview, pp. 2-3).

Based on what I observed in Julia's field placement classroom, I would concur that she did not seem to benefit as much as the others from the focus on discussions. In the four discussions I watched Julia "lead" – either in person or on videotape – she changed very little in terms her participation. Throughout the semester, she said very little during discussions of literature with her students. And although she eventually came to realize that she needed to spend considerable time preparing students for discussions, these realizations never really impacted her teaching practice.

From an activity theory perspective, Julia's remarks are quite significant. They suggest that the English methods seminar was a highly productive and fully functioning activity system. As Cole, Engestrom and Vasquez (1997) write, "The multi-voiced and multi-layered nature of activity systems is both a resource for collective achievement and a source of compartmentalization and conflict. Contradictions are the engine of change and development in an activity system as well as a source of conflict and stress (p. 4). As Julia suggested, and as Stacey would readily acknowledge, the seminar was profoundly multi-voiced and multi-layered. But according to Cole and his colleagues, the level of frustration Julia experienced was a necessary and productive component to her and her classmates' learning. Out of these varied perspectives, interns pushed themselves and each other to better understand the teacher's role in discussions.

Thus, in spite of Julia, Steve, and Alexis' concerns, it seems that Stacey's emphasis on discussions played a critical role in engendering intern learning. The focus on discussions in the course allowed interns multiple points of entry into conversations around discussions. Although these conversations seemed, at times, unrelated to interns' specific contexts or situations, interns benefited from mediation with their peers over the course of the semester. If the course had been more traditionally organized, where "discussions" were "covered" one week and then forgotten, one wonders whether opportunities for substantive mediation would have surfaced. In the following section, I describe and explain what this mediation looked like, and how Stacey's pedagogy provided both a model and context for conversations about discussions.

Learning from Stacey

As I noted in Chapter Four, Stacey offered her students a straightforward albeit simple definition of open discussions on the first day of the semester. Borrowing from language in an article by Sorenson (1993), Stacey explained that in open discussions the teacher “sits away from the class and . . . interjects as little as possible, preferably not at all and . . . the students generate everything” (Class Transcript, page 1). Based on my observations of the English methods seminar, Stacey’s practice of leading discussions was never this simple. She seemed to me a very talented teacher who knew when and how to interject her ideas into discussions, and when and how to redirect discussions that strayed too far from her objectives. As the data in this section will illustrate, Stacey’s pedagogy served as a powerful teaching model for her students over the course of the semester. As interns watched Stacey lead discussions, they picked up important lessons that helped them develop a more complicated understanding of the teacher’s role in whole-class discussions.

Do as I Do, Not as I Say

Stacey’s goal for the first class meeting was for students to understand how to write an appropriate and effective research question. These questions, she told her students, would guide decisions about data collection and analysis. To accomplish her goal, Stacey listed several possible questions on the board, and asked students how they would go about researching them. Students shared their thoughts, talked about what the questions meant to them, and explained how they would design studies around them. Stacey allowed the conversation to move in several directions, as students talked about

the advantages and disadvantages of broad versus narrow research questions. They talked about the merits and dangers of quantitative versus qualitative studies. They talked about whether to look at what the teacher is doing or what the students are doing. And finally, students talked about how and whether they would be able to use their findings to plan and lead open discussions of literature. After about twenty minutes of a conversation that went in numerous directions, Stacey finally interjected:

Okay, this is an open discussion we are having right now, and I'm gonna step in because I do have an objective for today and we are going to meet it.³⁰ So, you're all asking really great questions that you can think about (related to your research projects), but I want us to nail down a question (Transcript, 1/15/2003).

In making this statement, Stacey partially defied her earlier explanation of open discussions (from the Sorenson article). She demonstrated that, in fact, teachers do not merely "sit back" and allow students to take discussions in whichever direction they choose. In allowing space, but then bringing her students to some consensus, Stacey suggested a more complex role for teacher's in discussions, one that straddles between overt participation and relative obscurity. In other words, the teacher does not merely sit back and allow students to take a discussion in wherever they choose. Rather, the teacher's role in discussions is to allow students space to explore and learn from each other, but also to help students move toward specific instructional objectives.

For the balance of this first class meeting, Stacey assumed a more active presence and role in the discussion. Before her interjection, Stacey participated only six times out

³⁰ One of the possible research questions that Stacey had listed was, "Are open discussions effective," which then led students to talk about the relationship between open discussions and instructional objectives.

of 36 turns. Of the 23 turns that followed, ten belonged to Stacey. While number of teacher turns is just one indicator of participation and involvement, in this case it reflected a more active teacher role in leading students toward specific objectives. During my interviews with interns at the end of the semester, they shared their perceptions of Stacey's role during discussions. Following is an excerpt of my conversation with Alexis regarding this aspect of Stacey's pedagogy:

Alexis: (In our English methods seminar), Stacey would do a teacher-led or student-led discussion, but she wouldn't say, "Okay, this is a teacher-led model of a discussion." I mean, if you take time to think about it, you realize, but then it's too hard to back-track and see exactly what she did to set it up. You know, she, you don't realize the teaching practice that's going on because it's natural, it almost seems second nature. Does that make sense?

Kevin: Yes, it does make sense. It's almost like you didn't consciously think, "Oh, this is what Stacey did so let me try that," but as you reflect back on your experience, it sounds like you believe you did pick up on things she was doing.

Alexis: Yeah, things like, um, like when we discussed, when she showed that film clip, and we discussed it, and we sat in small groups first and then we talked about it in the larger group – I didn't think about it at the time but she was modeling practices that we were learning about (Alexis Interview, page 4).

For Alexis, learning from and through Stacey was a subconscious process. It was also a highly effective one in terms of what she learned. Although Stacey never explicitly directed her students' attention to her involvement and participation, they picked up on

what she did and incorporated what they learned into their own beliefs. In the example Alexis provides, she refers to a film clip of a teacher leading a discussion of literature. After the clip, Stacey instructs students to work in small groups before they talk about the teacher (in the film clip) in the larger group. While Stacey says nothing about this transition from small to large group, her students pick up on the move as a teaching practice worth modeling.

Other interns shared similar thoughts about what they gained through observing their instructor, particularly in terms of negotiating open discussions with specific instructional objectives. For example, as Emily explained:

I knew every day we would come in and we'd chat, you know, about teaching, um, about discussions, about whatever Stacey had on her agenda. Every now and then we would stray away and I know Stacey never stopped us – I know she never seemed very happy with us at the end of the hour, but at the end of the course, I think she was happy with how things went (Interview, 5/6/2003, page 5).

In this case, Stacey models what it might look like to allow students to talk about things important to them, while at the same time adhere to specific goals and objectives. Emily notes, "Every now and then we would stray away and I know Stacey never stopped us." In observing their teacher, interns begin to realize that leading discussions, like any other teaching strategies, are more art than science. Good teachers have to be flexible, to adapt to continuously changing circumstances, to constantly assess student learning.

Combined, Alexis and Emily seem to suggest that although they were not necessarily sure *what* Stacey wanted to accomplish each class meeting, they believed she

was comfortable with how things progressed in the course. And since discussion was a central pedagogy in the course, this indicated to Emily and her classmates that Stacey was largely pleased with her role in leading discussions. Emily makes particular reference to Stacey's efforts to meet her instructional objectives. She also seems to indicate an awareness of the tension associated with both allowing open discussion and moving toward specific lesson objectives, noting, "I know she never seemed very happy with us . . . (but) was happy with how things went."

Austin and Steve also talked about what and how they learned through Stacey's efforts to encourage open discussion and participation, as well as move toward specific lesson objectives. Steve talked about his learning to lead discussions:

Part of it came from seeing teachers model it, and whether they know it or not, I'm observing it – here at Empire or at Middletown University, through the English methods seminar with the way Stacey handles discussions. She'll say, "Okay, I want you to discuss. I'm going to take a step out and we are going to go for 15 minutes." She's modeling it, she just not saying, "I'm modeling a discussion here for you" . . . sometimes, the topic would go off onto a tangent and not necessarily stay on course . . . I just sat back and watched how things sort of operated and thought, "Okay, let's see how I can mold it." Most of the time, I didn't really participate much in the seminar. Neither did Austin. Most of our stuff, in terms of feeding off each other, happened on our walk after class back to our cars, where we'd just sort of talk about class, bounce a few ideas off each other, maybe go to Spagnolo's for dinner and talk some more about it (Interview, 5/2/2003, page 4).

Steve raises several points worth noting here with respect to what and how he learned from and through Stacey's pedagogy. First, similar to Alexis and Emily, he talks about implied learning, what he gained through watching Stacey, even though Stacey never explicitly said that she was modeling a teacher's role in discussions. Second, Steve shares insight into his thought process when the class would "go off onto a tangent." He would observe, and think about how he could "mold it," presumably if a similar scenario were to arise in his own placement classroom. But Steve, in contrast to many others, kept these thoughts to himself, and waited to talk about what he had heard and seen with Austin. Steve taught at the same school as Austin, and the two were friends as well as classmates.

Through their relationship, and through observing Stacey, Steve came to believe that one central role of the teacher in discussions is to "clarify things, to wrap things up, or to restructure things if there is some confusion or if the topic is just getting stale" (Interview, 5/2/2003, page 3). Later in our interview, he added:

The teacher has to relax, and trust that his students will get to where he wants them to go. Sometimes it happens, sometimes it will not. So just move on and think of something new on your feet that will address your objective in a different way (Sam Interview, page 12).

His remarks lead us to believe that even though Steve was not an active speaker in the English methods seminar, he was an astute observer. He observed Stacey lead discussions, and took note of the ways in which she changed course when there was "some confusion" or when things were getting "stale." He also noted the level of trust

Stacey placed on her students, and decided that, on occasion, teachers may have to just think on their feet and move in a direction they had not previously expected. These lessons are in sharp contrast to what Steve and most of his classmates believed about discussions at the start of the semester. Then, interns believed one of two things: Teachers were either very involved in discussions, or they stayed completely out, and let students do the talking. With Stacey's pedagogy as a model, Steve and his classmates developed a much clearer and more complex understanding of the teacher's role in discussions.

Like Steve, Austin shared what he learned as he watched Stacey lead discussions, and particularly those where his classmates seemed to want to dominate the conversation. During our interview, he noted, "I think I said in class one day, 'You know, Stacey, I understand what you're wanting from us, but it's so, I mean, I don't know how you do that.' I guess you can be focused on yourself all the time (as the teacher), but I guess there's that interplay between what my students are doing and what I am doing – it's not necessarily one thing or the other, but rather, as any relationship is, I think, both forces are always at work" (Interview, 5/8/2003, page 4).

Clearly, Stacey's pedagogy served as an important model for Austin. It raised questions, and forced him to think about what he did in his field placement classroom with his students. In this example, he talks about what he learned through Stacey in terms of the relationship, or "interplay" between teacher and students. He concludes, at least for now, that both teacher and students have a mutual responsibility to each other during discussions. But these lessons are never simple or clear. Although he observes what know

Stacey does, he tells her, “I don’t how you do that,” a signal to Stacey and to us that his pursuit for meaning of the teacher’s role in discussions will continue.

Thus, for Austin as well as for Steve and the other interns, observing Stacey teach provided both a context and model to think about their own teaching practice, and specifically about leading discussions. Through leading discussions in his placement classroom, and through watching Stacey in the seminar, Austin eventually concluded, “The teacher has to determine up front whether or not there is something he wants students to get out of a discussion. This will ultimately determine his level of involvement” (Interview, 5/8/2003, page 1). This notion reflects a vast departure from Austin’s beliefs about discussions at the beginning of the semester, when he believed discussions should be “very teacher-led and teacher-focused.” While it would be inaccurate to suggest that Stacey’s pedagogy alone was responsible for this change, it certainly played a role.

In one case, it was what an intern taught Stacey that helped the intern to learn about leading discussions. The intern, Alexis, had Stacey as an instructor for an earlier course in the teacher education program. In the following excerpt, from our interview, she explained what she had shared with Stacey after that earlier teacher education class:

Alexis: I told Stacey that, that some of the discussions she had (in an earlier teacher education course) that were student-centered were too student-centered. So she made some changes. I mean, I can tell in her questioning, like, “Okay, let’s move on,” that she is getting more involved in the discussion.

Kevin: So that more active role on Stacey’s part was helpful for you?

Alexis: I think so. I mean, how far off track can you get, even if it's studentcentered, and still get to the goal, so that students are learning? Even in (the seminar), I felt as though we spent too much time on stuff that was not connected to what we were learning or needed to learn (Alexis Interview, p. 5).

The above transcript suggests that Stacey's pedagogy served as an important model even when she may have made poor decisions. In this case, Alexis' critique of Stacey's teaching suggests that interns were prospective teachers at the same time they were students. They did not blindly accept whatever Stacey did as appropriate or effective, but routinely assessed her practice. In this way, Stacey's pedagogy was an important model for interns. But it was important for another reason as well, and that is the transparency with which Stacey presented her teaching. The fact that Stacey "made some changes" in her teaching suggests a view of teaching as a learning profession. By modeling this for interns, Stacey inspired her students to do the same.

As the above paragraphs have illustrated, Stacey's pedagogy generally offered a rich teaching model for students. It offered a context for interns to think about and discuss the meaning of discussions and the teacher's role in leading them. In the next section, I examine Stacey's pedagogy as a tool for mediation from a slightly different perspective – as one that varied in terms of her level of participation in discussions. By varying her involvement in course discussions over the semester, Stacey helped interns complicate in productive ways their understanding of teacher's role. She helped them understand that leading discussions does not look the same way, all the time, but varies according to the students' needs and lesson's goals.

Varying Levels of Participation

In addition to providing opportunities for students to examine and talk about discussions, Stacey also provided students with countless opportunities to see an experienced teacher strategically vary her participation in discussions. As noted earlier, Stacey said very little during the first half of the first class meeting. Students went in various directions talking about their research questions for about an hour, after which Stacey interrupted and very clearly articulated her agenda and lesson objectives. On some occasions, by contrast, Stacey said virtually nothing during the entire class period. One example of this occurred on March 12, 2003, when students presented their videotaped discussions. A total of six students presented their videotaped discussions on this particular day. During the entire two hours, the only input from Stacey came after the first student presented. She said, "Okay, we need to move on to Julia's discussion, but thank you very much for that Matt!" (Transcript, 3/12/03).

In other words, on that particular day, Stacey allowed her students to raise and talk about whatever issues intrigued them with respect to the videotaped discussions. During the two hours, with no input from Stacey, interns talked about the importance of planning in leading discussions, ways of recognizing less vocal students during discussions, things teachers do that may silence students, what it means to ask thought provoking questions, strategies to get students to listen better to each other, ways of creating space for students to feel comfortable participating, when and how teachers should restate students' questions or comments, and how to move students toward talking to each other rather than always going through the teacher during discussions. With no

assistance from Stacey, interns delved into and explored a host of very relevant issues related to the teacher's role in discussions of literature.

On other days, Stacey played a much more active role in the class discussion. To illustrate how varied her participation was during the semester, I offer the following chart, Table 6.1, which indicates date of class meeting, central lesson or activities, number of contributions from Stacey, and total number of contributions³¹. I included only those class meetings which I fully transcribed, and those in which whole class discussion was the central form of instruction.

Table 6.1: Participation Patterns in the English Methods Seminar

Date of Class Meeting	Main Lesson / Activities	Number of Instructor Contributions	Total Number of Contributions	Percentage Instructor Contributions
1/15/03	Introduction to course, discussion research questions, discussion rubric	20	59	34%
1/22/03	Discussion rubric	22	68	32%
1/29/03	Autobiographical narratives	5	42	12%
2/26/03	Discussion about research projects, videotaped discussions (3 presentations)	7	52	13%
3/12/03	Videotaped discussions (6 presentations)	1	78	> 1%
3/19/03	Videotaped discussions (4 presentations)	10	112	9%
3/26/03	Videotaped discussions (6 presentations)	8	106	8%
4/3/03	Videotaped discussions (5 presentations)	26	134	19%

³¹ Only those class meetings that were videotaped are included. Also, a "contribution" is defined as any verbal input, regardless of length. Thus, "Okay," is considered as much a "contribution" as an entire passage, as long as the passage is continuous – that is, uninterrupted by another speaker.

The above chart is interesting for a couple different reasons. First, the chart offers evidence of the extent to which Stacey varied her participation during discussions. Whereas during the first class meeting she contributed 34% of the total number of contributions, she participated only once out of a total of 78 contributions in mid-March (this was the class meeting noted earlier). Second, with two exceptions (March 12 and April 3), the chart suggests that, over the course of the semester, Stacey participated in discussions with less and less frequency. In the case of the class session on March 12, 2003, as noted above, interns considered a range of important discussion-related issues at significant depth, absent Stacey's direction. On this particular day, they questioned each other, contemplated issues over long periods of time, and developed relative consensus around some very difficult pedagogical issues. As Kathy noted, she and her classmates took notice of Stacey's varied levels of participation during the semester:

It's interesting, you know, because I was looking at Stacey as the teacher and we were the students, and looking at different things you're supposed to do and not do because sometimes you would see her completely step out of the discussion and let us lead. And then other times, she would tell us her opinion, and I think it set a really good example for us, which it says right in the literature, how some people believe you should step out at times, and at other times to step back in and push us further. I think she did that a lot with us, setting an example, saying, "This is what I believe, but you don't necessarily have to be the same way." That was very appealing, and I did exactly the same things with my students (Interview, 4/30/03).

Kathy's remarks suggest that Stacey's pedagogy had a profound impact on her understanding of the teacher's role in discussions. Although Stacey never explicitly told her students to pay attention to what she was doing, how and when she stepped into and out of whole class discussions, they carefully watched her every move. As Kathy notes, "It set a really good example for us." In most cases, Kathy and her peers did not merely imitate what they observed. Rather, they thought and talked about what they saw in Stacey, and how she handled herself in discussions. As Emily explained, "I think the big reason I can lead discussions is because of our (seminar) this year. I made a replica of what we did in class, in my own classroom . . . I talked with my peers, and modeled what I saw each Wednesday in my own classroom. Because of that, I was able to do what I did in my class" (Emily Interview, p. 9).

For Emily and others, the English methods seminar provided numerous opportunities for interns to think in creative ways about their own teaching practice. In this way, they acted as students as well as emerging teachers in the course. They observed how Stacey and "modeled what (they) saw" in their own classrooms. In most cases, they borrowed ideas and principles from Stacey's teaching and molded them to their own situations. In some cases, for example Julia, modeling looked more like imitating. Julia said as much during our interview, when I asked about a discussion I had observed her lead in her field placement classroom. She responded:

A few days before our discussion, I told my students that we were going to have a discussion, and what they should expect. Then, on the day before the discussion, I had my students make a list of the qualities of a good discussion, kinda like the same thing we did in class (Julia Interview, p. 1).

Although the discussion she refers to was the first one she attempted, and very early in the semester, her remarks make clear the difference between “model” and “imitation.” On the first day of the seminar, Stacey had her students make a list of the qualities of a good discussion. As they named qualities, she wrote them onto the board. In preparation for a discussion in her field placement classroom, Julia did the same thing, even though the goal for her discussion was very different than it was for Stacey and her interns. In addition, as noted in an earlier chapter, Julia followed Stacey’s model and said very little during her discussion, even though it was the very first discussion in which her students had ever really participated. Thus, at least early in the semester, some interns failed to embrace the complexities associated with Stacey’s pedagogy, and merely imitated what they saw her do. Through mediation with her classmates around Stacey’s pedagogy, Julia and others eventually came to understand these complexities.

In addition to seeing their teacher peel herself away from productive discussions over the course of the semester, Stacey’s students also got to see what teachers should do when discussions become counter-productive. A good example of this occurred on April 3, 2003, a day when, as noted in the chart above, Stacey reversed her semester-long trend of participating less and less in discussions. On this day, 19% of the total number of contributions came from Stacey. So what happened? What compelled Stacey to contribute so much, particularly since it seemed she was trying to participate less and less as the semester progressed? In the following paragraphs, drawing on transcripts from the April 3, 2003 class meeting, I examine these and related question and illustrate yet another way in which Stacey’s pedagogy served as a powerful mediating tool for her students.

The class meeting on April 3, 2003 started out just like the five sessions that preceded it. Several students were slated to present and open for discussion their videotaped discussions to the class. Stephanie went first, followed by Stan, and then Carmen, Pamela, and Gwen. Of Stacey's 26 contributions on this day, 12 occurred in the context of Stan's videotaped discussion. Below is a transcript of the discussion the immediately preceded Stan's presentation to the class:

Stan: This is seventh grade. And that's something that I'm really struggling with in terms of discussions. Stephanie's (discussion) was awesome in terms of classroom management, but in seventh grade it's hard to get them to discuss about anything, for any length of time. They're just, their attention span is so short. This discussion, ironically, was one of my better classes in terms of the discussions that we have had, but, it's still very teacher-directed, teacher-led, teacher prodded, and really very . . . I feel there is no way I can even come close to stepping out of the conversation. Even if I move at all through the room, students are like, "Hey, where's he going?" So I really have to, and it doesn't fit my style at all, but I've gotta be up front, and direct the class. It's a lot different with my honors class, who are a lot better at independent thinking. These kids are not –

Stacey: So, getting students to participate more. So, what have you done? I mean, what have you tried to get them to participate more?

Stan: I've tried using in-class credits, and I just, like I said, I just thought that was too cumbersome for me to put my head down and check off someone's name while they were talking. I've also tried to create that, you know, safe community for students to participate, but you guys know, that's not easy with twelve,

thirteen, fourteen year-old students, problems with self-consciousness, etcetera, etcetera . . . So, did I answer your question?

Stacey: Not entirely. It's more, like, if you want them to participate more . . . In terms of, like, planning . . . Are there things you do in planning the discussion in the hopes that it will lead to more participation?

Stan: Just talking to each other. One of the things I cannot stand is teacher-led, teacher-centered instruction, but talking to each other is just not something that happens in seventh grade. You know, the classroom environment is so important and we are just now getting to a point where I think students feel comfortable, and I have two weeks left of student-teaching. So I don't know, it took that long to create a . . . safe community, but . . . and this videotape is like smack-dab in the middle of the discussion, so here it goes.

Immediately following this discussion, Stan began his videotaped discussion. In it, we see Stan standing in the front of the classroom, asking students questions about *Belle Prater's Boy*. Students respond directly to Stan, the teacher, who offers an evaluation of the response. In this way, the "discussion" much more closely resembles a recitation than it does an open discussion, at least of how "open discussion" has been defined in the class. In the above interchange between Stan and Stacey, we see a much more direct, even confrontational Stacey than we have seen for most of the semester. She presses Stan to focus less on his students and what they do or have done, and more on himself, as the teacher, and what he can or has done to prepare his students. Stan either doesn't understand or refuses to embrace Stacey's line of reasoning. He offers several

explanations for why discussion “is just not something that happens in seventh grade,” and argues that the only way he can get his students to talk about the text is to play a central role himself.

Following the videotape, several students challenge Stan about his pedagogy. Alexis, for example, tells Stan, “It’s about questioning, and the kinds of questions you ask, if your goal is to have students participate more.” (Transcript, p. 42). But unlike other interns and other post-videotape discussions, Stan refuses to acknowledge his role in his class’ inability to have a discussion. He feels convinced that he has done everything in his power to help his students understand what it means to participate in discussions of literature, and rejects any suggestion that he is to blame. After several of his classmates offer suggestions, Stacey offers her thoughts:

Stacey: Well, one of things we’ve raised about discussion is purpose, and why we are even doing discussions. So, in this discussion, what was your purpose? Was it to review?

Stan: Yeah, to talk about stuff that we did on our district assessment, to see where they fall and all of that –

Stacey: Because someone said it seemed like more of a recitation. So, could it be that, for your purpose, a recitation was more appropriate?

Stan: Yeah, but with that class a recitation is about all I can do with them. They mandate that. But then again, when I hear that come out of my mouth, I think about what I have done, and there are other ways . . . um, for example, we’ve never been in a circle before.

Stacey: Why do they “mandate” that? I mean, I guess I’m wondering what they do that makes you say, “They can’t discuss.”

Stan: They have no training. I mean, all they’ve done is regurgitate back what they hear the teacher say. Just to be able to regurgitate back what will be on the test is a sign of competence for them. I mean, I know it sounds horrible but . . .

Gwen: Do you ever let them talk about their own things? Like things that are of interest to them, to maybe give them some ownership over the topic and discussion?

Stan: We’re lucky if we have a discussion that takes place over the course of four minutes.

Throughout the post-videotape discussion, Stan seems unwilling to accept much if any responsibility for failing to lead discussions with his students. When his classmates challenge him to consider his efforts and his students from different perspectives, he offers more and more elaborate explanations or excuses. Stacey finally intervenes. But she is gentle in her approach, at least in the first part of the transcript above. She refers to the purposes of discussions, as talked about earlier in the semester, and suggests that perhaps Stan was leading a recitation because, in this case, it simply made more sense. In doing this, she provides Stan an opportunity to save face. And while Stan agrees with Stacey, he also returns to his earlier claim that with this particular class, “a recitation is about all (he) can do.”

Stan never relented. In fact, he finished the semester with most of the same feelings and attitudes about students and discussions as he started. Unlike most of the

other interns, who developed a more refined, nuanced understanding of the teacher's role in discussions of literature, Stan stagnated. But clearly, if we consider Stacey's feedback above as part of her overall pedagogy, we can understand why she succeeded with so many interns. When discussions moved forward, when they engaged students, when interns talked about discussions in ways that showed growth and understanding, Stacey removed herself, sometimes entirely, from discussions. But when it seemed things were not moving forward, as in the case of Stan, Stacey played a central role in discussions. She redirected questions, offered alternative explanations, and confronted students on beliefs that seemed outright wrong. In this way, her pedagogy served as a mediating tool in the English methods activity system, one that interns could observe, challenge, talk about, and most importantly, learn from.

Interview data suggest that interns not only paid attention to these models, but talked and learned about them with and through each other. In my interview with Emily, for example, she told me she learned a great deal just by watching Stacey lead discussions. I asked her, "How do you think that happened? I mean, what made that work? How were you able to talk about things in such substantive and meaningful ways?" She responded:

Um, I think because Stacey is not, um, she isn't very opinionated. She's not that dictator-type teacher that says, "Well, this is what I believe, and so you should too." She kinda says, "You might feel one way and I might feel another, but I am not above you." She never put herself above us, and that really helped, because she would be like any other teacher. I think that's really important for any teacher,

to sit down and be amongst the students, and I adopted that to my own classroom.

I sat down and I would just, like change my discourse (Emily Interview, p. 5).

Emily's remarks demonstrate the many and nuanced ways in which Stacey's pedagogy provided a model for them to think about in the context of their own teaching. As Emily explains, Stacey "never put herself above us," which allowed Emily and her classmates to engage with each other in a comfortable and non-threatening environment. In this way, Stacey inspired confidence in her interns. They watched what she did from the perspective of a teacher as well as a student. They watched her make mistakes and when and how she inserted herself into discussions. And when students like Stan seemed to miss some of the central points of the lesson, she intervened. Through these observations, in conjunction other course tools, interns developed a sophisticated understanding of the teacher's role in discussions.

A Final Note on Pedagogy

Throughout this chapter, I have described and explained how Stacey's pedagogy served as an important model and mediating tool for interns. I have also discussed how Stacey's focus on discussions in the course encouraged interactions between and among interns. But was it this simple? How, if at all, did other features of the course facilitate interns' capacity and willingness to mediate with each other around Stacey's pedagogy and the other tools? In this section, I briefly respond to these questions, and revisit these themes in the final chapter.

All but one of the major assignments in the English methods seminar revolved around discussions. The one that did not was an autobiographical narrative, in which students were asked to write and share with each other an essay in which they “explore the connection between who you are, what you believe, and how this shapes your teaching and expectations for and about your students.” The narrative assignment went on to say:

These narratives should include autobiographical information about your family background, educational experiences, or other personal experiences that have shaped how you think about yourself as a person, or teacher, and how you think about education in general. For example, how did your parents shape your views of education? How did your experiences as a student (successes and failures) shape your views of learning and students? As you write about parts of your life, consider and explain how who you are affects and shapes your views of teaching and the students in your classes (Narrative assignment, 2003).

During the fourth class meeting, in mid-February, students read their narratives aloud to their classmates. They talked in very intimate and personal terms about race, class, gender, their families, and their schooling experiences. Their narratives were raw, unfiltered, and (for some) painfully honest. As I sat and listened to interns share these narratives with each other, I felt a closeness grow between them. Although my interviews with interns focused on discussions, a few talked about the narratives. One of them, Kathy, connected the narratives to learning about discussions. She explained:

I think the narratives brought us closer together, because we could look at each other and say, “Hey, wow, that person shared that experience with me,” and we could relate to each other in very personal ways, and we sat there and affirmed what each other had said. It was just very powerful. Um, and I think it was key on Stacey’s part that we did the narratives, and then watched videotapes of ourselves leading discussions, because it was then easier to talk about the discussions. Since we knew each other, we could talk openly about our teaching and not feel as though we were attacking each other. In other words, we could critically examine our teaching practice, largely because we knew each other as people (Kathy Interview, p. 7).

Although Kathy was the only intern to explicitly link learning about discussions to the narratives, her remarks have powerful implications for what I have said in this and earlier chapters about mediation. Clearly, for Kathy, the narratives played an important role in creating conditions for interns to talk honestly and openly with each other, to mediate with each other around their videotaped discussions, and to learn and grow from these experiences. My reason for raising Kathy’s remarks in this chapter is because of what she says about Stacey. She explains, “I think it was key on Stacey’s part that we did the narratives . . . because it was easier to talk about the discussions.” In this sense, in addition to providing model and tool for mediation, Stacey’s pedagogy promoted a caring and supportive environment for interns. Through this environment, interns learned about discussions from and through each other in conjunction with the tools of the course.

I share these connections near the end of my data chapters because for most of the interns, they did not come up our interviews. At the same time, as Kathy's remarks clearly suggest, learning through mediation with her classmates was clearly linked to the narratives. In the following chapter, I will examine this connection at considerable length, and explore how the autobiographical narratives may have played a role in interns' learning about discussions. For now, I direct my attention to one intern, Emily, and how she learned from and through Stacey's pedagogy to develop her practice of leading discussions. As I believe Emily's case will illustrate, a critical component of this learning is the interaction between two activity settings – the English methods seminar and the field placement classroom.

The Case of Emily

As noted in previous chapters, Emily completed her field placement experience in a rather unique high school setting. The school, Redwood High School, was one of two magnet high schools located within a very large, urban city and school district. In order to gain admittance into Redwood, students were required to take and pass an entrance examination. Emily's students, predominantly African-American, were bright, capable, and very self-motivated. When assigned texts to read for homework, they generally completed the reading. In these and other ways, Emily's students were quite similar to the students in Stacey's English methods seminar. In this final section, as with the previous two chapters, I offer a microanalysis of Emily's learning related to discussions of literature and beliefs about students.

Discussions Across Learning Settings

I observed Emily facilitate two discussions of literature over the course of the semester, one in mid-February, the other in late March. In preparation for the first discussion, students read from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). As her students filtered into the classroom, Emily reminded them that today was a "discussion day," and instructed them to "create their own space." For the first five minutes of the class period, students pushed desks against the walls, and then lay down and sat upon sheets and pillows that Emily kept in the classroom. Some merely sprawled out in their regular desk seats. Once everyone was settled, Emily distributed a "Prompt Sheet" to guide students through the discussion.

One of Emily's goals in the discussion was for her students to understand *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from what she called a "social constructivist" perspective. She reasoned, "My hope was to get my students to take ownership of these critical literary theories, so that they would be able to make good use of them on later occasions" (Emily Interview, p. 1). The day before the discussion, Emily had given her students an overview of social constructivism along with other critical literary theories. But as the lesson progressed, it became very apparent to both me and Emily that one day to prepare for such complex literary theories was insufficient.

For most of the lesson, students seemed to struggle with how to use these critical literary theories to understand their experiences or the text. In my interview with her, she readily acknowledged these issues, and then added, "If I were to do this lesson again, I would spend much more time with each lens, go much slower in teaching them to my students" (Emily Interview, p. 2). In this and other ways, Emily was a tremendously

reflective beginning teacher. Throughout her internship, she demonstrated an desire and willingness to learn and grow from her experiences. Later in our interview, I asked Emily what advice she might give to an intern about leading discussions, based on what she learned this year. She replied:

I would say that there is not a textbook answer for everything. A lot of times your class is going to stray in ways you cannot control, but you shouldn't think that because you didn't plan it in your lesson, it's not okay to occur. That is something I had to learn on my own, that I would tell the intern right away. It doesn't mean they are not learning if they stray away from the objective, or stray away from your through-line. It's okay, you don't always have to have this hold on your kids. Let them go and they'll do it on their own, like we did in (the English methods seminar). It might take them more time, but that's their way, let them do it, empower them, and they'll appreciate it and they won't be bored (Emily Interview, p. 9).

Emily's response is interesting for a couple different reasons. First and most related to the focus of this chapter is her implicit link to Stacey's pedagogy. Through Stacey's model, Emily seems to have internalized the belief that students need to feel empowered in discussions. They need to feel a sense of ownership over the material, as she talked about earlier in relation to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Although she does not specifically mention Stacey's pedagogy here, she previously talked about making a "replica" (Emily Interview, p. 9) of what she did with her classmates in her field placement classroom.

A second interesting aspect of Emily's response is her belief that she had to learn that students will "stray in ways you cannot control . . . on her own." By "on her own," we can only presume that Emily means through her field placement teaching. But based on what I have tried to illustrate in this chapter, we know this was not the case. In fact, interns learned a great deal from and through Stacey's pedagogy, often by using her teaching to facilitate conversations with each other about discussions. Perhaps what Emily really means by this is that in order to fully understand what it means to lead a discussion, one must experience the link between theory and practice. In her final remarks to me during our interview, she said this herself, in her own way:

I was a very unengaged teacher education person until this year. I, I will admit is more than anyone else, and have a low grade point to prove it. I'm a practical person, I need to see what is going to happen and it wasn't until this year that I was able to apply what I learned to my classroom . . . I never felt empowered until this year, when I could actually use and draw on my own experiences. In (our previous class) and (again now in the seminar), I could draw on those and my colleagues' experiences and that was empowering, and therefore I learned a lot more from the class. And this also led me to empower my own high school students . . . In retrospect, I think I was bored with my (earlier) education courses because I never owned any of the experiences (Emily Interview, p. 10).

Although these comments address issues that go beyond Stacey's pedagogy, it seems clear that what Emily saw each week in the seminar played a central role in her learning and development as a teacher. Equally important, however, were the

opportunities Emily had to try out and experience what she saw in her own classroom. In the second discussion I observed her facilitate, Emily again used a prompt sheet to help her students navigate through the conversation. Her students appeared much more relaxed and confident than they had in the first discussion I observed. In addition, they seemed to actually listen to what each other was saying, and directly responded to or questioned each other.

In preparation for this discussion, which took place near the end of March, students read poetry by Langston Hughes. While I did not audiotape or videotape this discussion, I recorded that during the 30 minute discussion students directly responded to each other a total of 17 times (Field notes, 3/26/03). By comparison, in the first discussion, they did not directly respond to each other at all, but merely read what they had written in response to each of the prompt sheet questions. By comparison, the latter discussion also seemed more relaxed than the former. In an essay she wrote for the English methods seminar, here is how Emily wrote about the latter discussion:

(In this discussion) I realized that I need to have realistic goals in mind . . . These goals should comply with (students') learning of life lessons, public communication abilities, textual inferences, leadership skills, unique textual synthesis, and so forth. If my goals are too specific, this teaching method will fail every time. The objectives must be somewhat general and adaptive, depending on what the community decides to discuss (Emily Essay, p. 4).

Through a combination of experiences, including her observation of Stacey, mediation with her classmates around Stacey's pedagogy, conversations with her mentor

teacher, and her own teaching, Emily developed a complex understanding of the teacher's role in discussions. In the above excerpt she talks about flexibility and adaptability in terms of one's instructional goals in discussions. She talks about the relationship between instructional goals and students' experiences and communication skills. And finally, Emily talks about the dangers of being "too specific," and the need for teachers to consider the needs of their classroom communities. These perspectives sharply contrast with her beliefs at the start of the semester, when she believed the teacher's role in discussions was to "move the class toward specific objectives" (Emily Interview, p. 9).

New Ways of Seeing Students

In addition to a deeper understanding of the teacher's role in discussions, the semester in the seminar seemed to help Emily transform her beliefs about students whose race or ethnicity differed from her own. As noted at the start of this section, Emily taught at a high school comprised mostly of African-American students. She wanted to teach at Redwood High School in part because of its proximity to where she lived, and in part because she wanted to learn more about teaching in a large urban city like Denton. During our interview, she talked about some of the challenges she faced within herself in terms of stereotypes about students from Denton. "As far as race is concerned," she said, "I really tried to come in with no stereotypes, which is hard in Denton because people are so shocked when I say I teach in Denton. There are so many negative conceptions about the Denton system" (Emily Interview, p. 4). She then shared an example of her stereotypes:

On occasion I have slipped and said things like, “I didn’t expect you guys would be as smart as you are,” to which my students responded, “Why, is it because we’re black?” And I found myself having to dig out of some of these statements, and I realized that I probably did have those stereotypes about them. But through the course of working with my students, I have come to appreciate how much they have to offer . . . At one point, I think in response to their question about being black, I even said to them, “It’s because you’re smarter than even I was in high school!”

Throughout the semester and my interviews with Emily, it was clear that she believed students from Denton – perhaps specifically African-American students – were not as capable as white, suburban students. However, through learning about discussions of literature, she came to see her students as assets. In talking about one student, Milton, she explained, “He never really did much in class, except during open discussions, where he contributed so much! So I learned that even though you may think you know your students, there is always more to learn” (Emily Interview, p. 6). She later explained how discussions turned her students into better writers, as they learned to see and represent things in their papers from multiple points of view. In this sense, Emily, like Stacey, used discussions to create opportunities for her students to engage in meaningful, productive ways around course texts and artifacts.

Stacey’s pedagogy was a powerful mediating tool for Emily and her classmates. By watching Stacey, and through talking with each other and linking what saw to their field placement classrooms, interns deepened their understanding of understanding of

discussions. In this way, Stacey's pedagogy was a constant hum in the background of the English methods seminar. Before and after class, on their drives to and from home, over dinner, and in conversations with their mentor teachers, interns talked about Stacey's teaching practice. Through these multiple and interacting exchanges, they not only learned more about the teacher's role in discussions, but transformed how they understood and saw students. As Emily said, "I've learned to see my students as learning tools, and that I have to create a learning community" (Emily Interview, p. 4). Given what I saw and heard from Emily, no doubt the bulk of this learning came from and through Stacey's pedagogy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In Chapter One, I set out to understand how an English methods seminar helped pre-service English teacher candidates learn to facilitate discussions of literature. In that same chapter, I noted three aspects of the course that seemed significant: First, that discussions of literature were a focal point of the weekly course; that is, tasks and assignments were organized around this teaching method. Second, that pre-service teachers took the course during their final semester in the program, which coincided with their student teaching internship. And finally, that of the 20 students in the class, about half taught in socio-culturally diverse, urban schools, while the rest taught in more socially and racially homogeneous, suburban schools.

In Chapter Two, I laid out the conceptual framework for my study. I argued that because of the multiple settings in which teacher learning occurs, socio-historical activity theory, or activity theory for short, offered an appropriate and useful lens to understand my data. This framework, in conjunction with grounded theory methods of data analysis, allowed me to see and understand pre-service learning from multiple perspectives. It also helped me to identify and explain how three course tools – textual documents, the videotaped discussions, and the instructor’s pedagogy – shaped and informed interns’ learning. The combination of activity and grounded theory provided a window into my interns’ thinking, which helped me to understand how mediation with each other around these tools helped interns deepen their understanding of the teacher’s role in discussions of literature.

In this chapter, I look across my findings to suggest themes related to teacher learning about discussions. I consider the multiple roles mediating tools played in helping interns learn to lead discussions, and the role of conflict in facilitating this development. Within these roles, several themes emerge, including: the importance of the interaction between and among tools in fostering learning; the capacity of tools to blur the line between theory and practice; the features of particular tools that foster learning; tension and conflict as catalysts for learning about discussions; conflict as it related to interns' beliefs about student diversity; and the role of "unplanned" tools in the English methods activity system. Through the various roles played by the course tools, and the conflict and tension created by these tools, interns in the English methods seminar began to understand their role in discussions as dynamic and flexible. They began to understand how context shaped, rather than dictated, what happened in discussions. And finally, through these experiences, interns began to understand the teacher's role in facilitating engaging, productive discussions of literature. In this chapter, I expand upon each of the above themes, and conclude with implications for programs of teacher education.

Tool Mediated Learning to Teach

In Chapter Three, I suggested that one way to think about interns' beliefs about their role in discussions was as a continuum. At one end of this continuum was a belief that teachers should distance themselves from discussions so that students could shape and direct the discourse. At the other end of this continuum was a belief that teachers needed to be active, engaged participants in discussions and move steadfast toward specific instructional objectives. Although this characterization was a bit simplistic, it

generally and accurately reflected the disparate views interns held regarding the teacher's role in leading discussions.

By contrast, in terms of beliefs about students and the teacher's role in preparing students for discussions, interns converged rather than diverged. Most if not all interns believed, at some level, that students would be readily able to participate in discussions of literature. They watched them talk with their friends in the hallways and after school, and therefore reasoned that students would have little trouble talking about literature in class. In addition, most if not all interns believed their ability to lead an effective discussion was related to where they taught, as well as the race, class, and ethnicity of their students. In other words, leading discussions in socially and culturally diverse urban schools was inherently different than in more homogeneous suburban schools.

Through mediation around various tools of the English methods activity system, interns began to embrace a more complex understanding of their role in leading and preparing students for discussions. They began to recognize that the teacher's role in discussions varies depending on several factors, including instructional objectives, time, setting and context, and their students' experiences. This learning, however, was by no means a linear process where a tool was introduced, and then interns talked about it and moved one step closer to understanding more about the teacher's role. By contrast, teacher learning was multidimensional and multidirectional, as the course tools continuously interacted with other tools, including interns' evolving beliefs. Teacher learning was also fraught with contradiction, which served as both a resource for knowledge as well as a source of conflict and tension. I begin with a look at the ways in which the *interaction* among tools shaped intern learning about discussions.

Interaction Among Mediating Tools

Although each data chapter in this study is organized around a specific mediating tool, none of these tools operated in complete isolation from the others. Rather, they continuously interacted with each other throughout the semester. As interns engaged in mediation with each other around specific tools – such as the published articles and the videotaped discussions – underlying these discussions were past conversations about other course tools, which included their beliefs about discussions. At times, these interactions were explicitly referenced; at other times, they were not. At still other times – perhaps most interestingly – the interactions between course tools were explicit, although not necessarily so to the participants themselves. An example of this latter type of interaction occurred as interns watched and discussed Kathy’s videotaped discussions of *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

After watching the taped discussion, interns talked about the challenges of getting students to ask authentic questions that might eventually lead to deep insights into literature. Emily asked, “Is there a way to come up with compelling questions for the more traditional texts, that might even get students who are interested in hip-hop, for example, to connect to them?” (Class Transcript, p. 17). Kathy responds:

All of my questions are student-centered, and there are plenty of opportunities for students to bring their own personal experiences to the questions. But even . . . where the student comes up with it, even though maybe I could come up with it, I think because he came up with it it’s that “ah-hah” moment. I think it make it a more original idea. So I think the trick is to figure out how to get (students) into that “ah-hah” moment (Class transcript, p. 17).

In this example, although Kathy does not specifically reference the “Discussion Rubric,” the words “ah-hah” come directly from its criteria for good discussions. Several weeks before interns discussed Kathy’s videotaped lesson, they talked about the “Discussion Rubric” and its relevance to their field placement classrooms. In the above example, one clearly sees how at least two course tools interacted with each other to push interns’ understanding of their role in planning for as well as facilitating discussions. I say “at least” because we know from the work of Bakhtin (1981) that beneath the surface of interactions are countless, though far less identifiable *utterances*. In the English methods activity system, these less visible tools were in constant interaction with more visible ones, such as published articles and the videotaped discussions. Moreover, all of these tools – the visible as well as the discrete – continuously interacted with interns’ beliefs, which themselves acted as mediating tools.

In Chapter Three, I wrote that we might think of interns’ beliefs as conceptual tools in that they were used and drawn on throughout the semester to deepen their understanding of the teacher’s role in discussions of literature. In the example above, as well as countless other examples in the previous chapters, the interactions between course tools and conceptual tools are apparent. Through my conversations with Kathy, I know that she initially believed the teacher played an active role in discussions of literature. As these beliefs interacted with tools of the English methods activity system, and through mediation around the videotaped discussion in the above example, Kathy and her classmates pushed and expanded each other’s thinking. In this way, interns’ initial and emerging beliefs played a critically important role in what and how they learned.

It might be useful to understand these interactions – between and among tools as well as between and among participants – in much the same way that Gutierrez et al (1995) characterize the “third space” that emerges between teacher and students in classrooms. Drawing on Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, they write:

It is important to recognize that dialogue is not simply between people and languages, but within people and between the evolving internal dialogizations people use to categorize experience (Bakhtin, 1981) . . . When a true dialogue between students and teacher occurs, rather than random associations between their scripts, a new transitional, less rigidly scripted space – the third space – is created. Within this space, there is more than a random association between script and counterscript; an actual merging of the teacher and student world views occurs. Here, what counts as knowledge is negotiated between student and teacher and by the possibility of a larger societal, or transcendent, script emerges (pp. 452-453).

In the context of the English methods activity system, we might think of this “third space” as the new understandings that emerge when interns and mediating tools interact with each other. In the example above, the “less rigidly scripted space” is what occurs when Kathy borrows language from across activity settings to achieve new realizations about discussions. Although Gutierrez et al refer to the interaction between teacher and students, and the knowledge that develops through this interaction, we can readily apply this framework to our study.

In the example with Kathy above, for example, the interaction is between and among participants and their appropriation of multiple mediating tools in the course. Through mediation with each other around these tools, interns interacted with each other to deepen their understanding of discussions and the teacher's role in leading them. Perhaps more importantly, because of the seamless, natural interaction between these tools, interns seemed willing and able to link theory to practice – to assimilate theoretical ideas from published documents into their practice of leading discussions. In this way, interaction among the tools of the English methods activity system played a significant role in shaping what interns learned. At times, however, this shaping was not always in a forward direction. In some instances – such as the case of Stan – interns' beliefs were so fixed they dominated interactions with other mediating tools.

In Stan's case, it was the interaction between his beliefs and other tools that reinforced his ideas about leading discussions. The conversation between Stan and Stacey toward the end of Chapter Six provides a good example. In that situation, interns mediated with each other and the teacher around multiple, interacting tools, including Stan's videotaped discussion, his beliefs about discussions, and Stacey's pedagogy. As Stacey and many of Stan's classmates encouraged Stan to think in different ways about his teaching practice, we see the constant emergence, re-emergence and persistence of his beliefs. Even after significant discussion and mediation around various course tools, Stan firmly held onto the belief that in his class, with his students, he is "lucky if we have a discussion that takes place over the course of four minutes" (Class Transcript, p. 19). Stacey's pedagogy—of challenging Stan's beliefs—allowed other students to learn from

this interaction between the videotape and Stan's beliefs, and to see the more dominant role the teacher needs to play in particular discussion situations.

The broader point to make is that interns rarely, if ever, engaged in mediation with each other around a single, isolated tool or artifact. Instead, their conversations reflected a constant and continuous interaction among and between numerous conceptual and practical tools (Grossman et al, 1999), including their beliefs, the course documents and literature, the videotaped discussions, and Stacey's pedagogy. Perhaps even more significant, however, was the seamlessness and imperceptibility of these interactions. As Bakhtin (1981) points out in his work on dialogism and heteroglossia, these interactions are largely imperceptible because of the permeability of the borders of these tools and settings. That is, because interns exchanged and appropriated ideas and information so freely across these mediating tools, the interactions between them are difficult if not impossible to delineate. Significantly, this permeability may have played an important role in blurring the sometimes contentious divide between theory and practice for teacher candidates.

Linking Theory to Practice

The literature on university-based teacher learning overwhelmingly reports that pre-service teachers find the leap from theory to practice difficult, impractical, and even irrelevant. Researchers argue that pre-service teachers, for the most part, consider discussions of theory a "waste of time," and that "real" learning happens in the classroom, through experience (Applebee, 1993; Baldassarre, 1997; Gallagher, 1996). Through the English methods activity system, the opposite seemed to be the case. Interns

regularly incorporated ideas from the written scholarship and the discussion rubric into their work, dialogue, and teaching practice, sometimes without realizing it.

As Chapter Three illustrated, interns carefully mediated with each other around published articles and other course documents.³² In the first half of the chapter, I described how interns participated in conversations about issues raised in these scholarly publications. The article by Sorenson, for example, provided a context for thinking about the teacher's role in discussions throughout the course. Directly or indirectly, most of the interns used Sorenson's definition of "open discussions" as a starting point for thinking about discussions. Further, the lessons and theoretical perspectives they took from this and other literature served as a backdrop for thinking and talking about the other course tools, as well as their work in field placement classrooms. While the interns wanted to better understand how Sorenson set up her open discussion, they did not see her ideas as removed from practice or irrelevant to their situations. Rather, Sorenson's ideas became another set of ideas in the conversation, along with their own beliefs and teaching experiences.

Just as important to our understanding of how the course tools helped interns bridge theory to practice is the way in which these theoretical perspectives were introduced. In the English methods seminar, it was usually the interns, and not the instructor, who folded artifacts and theories of best practice into class discussions. In the example above, it was not Stacey but Kathy who introduced language from the discussion rubric (an "ah-hah" moment) into the conversation. By not realizing that interns were drawing on the discussion rubric (and theories from other course tools) to shape their

³² I should define here what I mean by theory, at least as most pre-service teachers understand it. By theory I am not referring only to purely theoretical approaches to teaching and learning, but to any literature students read that constitutes methods of teaching English.

understanding of discussions, interns seemed willing and eager to link theory to practice. Moreover, because interns had integrated these theoretical perspectives into their own discourse, the link between theory and practice did not feel like an imposition.

Leont'ev's example of the primeval collective hunt, presented in Chapter One, offers a way of understanding the ease with which interns seemed able to bridge theory and practice. Leont'ev's example, which is often used to illustrate the underlying social features of activity theory, highlights the importance of cooperation among participants in an activity system. His example provides a useful metaphor for the English methods activity system because of the ways in which activity, motive, and operation both contradict and work in conjunction with each other. As an activity system, the central activity of the English methods seminar was conversation, while its motive was learning about discussions and the teacher's role in leading them. However, as with the hunting example, participants' individual operations did not always coincide with this activity and motive. They challenged ideas presented in the literature, questioned the applicability of what they saw in the videotaped discussions, and rarely talked in explicit terms about their instructor's pedagogy. But as Leontev (1978) writes of the beaters, interns collectively recognized that their action was "part of the activity (of learning to lead discussions)." That is, they were conscious of the fact that even as they participated in these individual – and often contradictory – operations, as a class they moved toward the larger activity of learning about discussions.

Through this system of conflicting actions and motives, interns were able to bridge theory and practice. In the example from above, Kathy's insertion of "ah-hah" (from the discussion rubric) into the larger class discussion contributed to the group's

collective motive and activity. Through her contribution, interns were able to move toward deeper understanding of discussions and the teacher's role in leading them. At the same time, when the discussion rubric was first introduced – and throughout the course for that matter – interns openly challenged its content and assumptions. In this way, tools of the English methods activity system provided opportunities for interns to challenge their beliefs about discussions, to incorporate ideas from and across activity settings, and to use their individual experiences to inform the larger conversation; in short, to bridge theory to practice.

These actions and operations sharply contrast what typically happens in traditional English methods courses, where students read literature (i.e., published articles) and/or watch case studies to help them think about planning, teaching, and assessing students in an English classroom. Students in traditional courses may even spend time in a field placement classroom, where they can implement what they learn through the literature. Ultimately, however, students typically reject the literature as “too idyllic,” “unrealistic,” or “ivory-towerish.” The gulf between theory and practice, as they see it, is wide and not easily traversed. In the English methods program at Middletown University, by contrast, through mediation around the course tools, through the course's multilayered structure and organization, and through the interactions between and among the tools as well as the participants, interns did not separate theory from practice. Rather, they informed each other, and the interactions between them served as a central and critical aspect of learning to lead discussions.

In closing, I briefly return to the explicitness (or lack thereof) with which interns made reference to the interactions between mediating tools. In the opening paragraphs of

this chapter, I wrote, “At times . . . the interactions between course tools were explicit, although not necessarily so to the participants themselves.” That is, while interns clearly saw interconnectedness among the course tools, they did not always make explicit this relationship. Given this, in conjunction with what they clearly learned, I wonder: Would it have been useful – that is, more educative – had interns or the instructor made these interactions more explicit? Would interns have benefited from a more clear and explicit discussions of the ways in which these course tools shaped and informed each other? Later, in the “Implications” section of this chapter, I speculate on these and other questions, and discuss the broader lessons for teacher education.

Tools That Matter

In this study, I focused my attention on three course tools – the textual artifacts, the videotaped discussions, and the instructor’s pedagogy. I also considered how interns’ beliefs and teaching practice, as conceptual tools, shaped their learning. While interns’ beliefs were an uncontrollable constant – that is, an inherent and unavoidable feature of any activity system in which these interns participated – the other tools were not. Rather, they were specifically selected by the instructor to facilitate intern learning, and by me as the researcher for analysis in this study.

In the case of the instructor, Stacey decided to use literature and videotaped discussions to teach her students about discussions. In my case, as the researcher, I decided that because of its apparent influence on interns, I should analyze Stacey’s pedagogy as a mediating tool in course. But what if Stacey had selected other tools? Why rely largely on interns’ own videos as opposed to, for example, case studies of

experienced teachers leading discussions? To what extent was intern learning shaped by the particular tools chosen for this course? What features did these tools share that fostered learning? In the following paragraphs, I attend to these and other questions in an attempt to understand how these particular tools of the English methods activity system facilitated intern learning.

While activity theory highlights the central role of the interaction among the subjects, tools and settings of the English methods activity system, it says less about the specific tools that mediate intern learning. While this study clearly shows the importance of the interaction among and between tools in fostering teacher learning, it also raises questions about the relative impact of *particular* tools in fostering *interaction* among the tools, and therefore intern learning. In this section I look closely at one of the three course tools – the interns’ videotaped discussions – to explore the particular features of tools that seem to foster intern learning about discussions. I focus on this tool not only because of its prominence in the course, but also because of its contrast with more traditional teacher preparation tools such as literature and case studies. Two features of this tool that seem especially important to teacher learning are: 1) its historical embeddedness and significance; and 2) its capacity to create and sustain interaction between interns’ internal and external developmental processes.

Bannon (1997) reminds us that tools do not merely *appear* in activity systems. Rather, they have a deep and relatively complex history. He writes:

Tools usually reflect the experiences of other people who have tried to solve similar problems at an earlier time and invented/modified the tool to make it more efficient. This experience is accumulated in the structural properties of tools as

well as in the knowledge of how the tool should be used. Tools are created and transformed during the development of the activity itself and carry with them a particular culture – the historical remnants from that development (Bannon, p. 2).

In other words, even when tools are introduced and used in new and original ways in activity systems, they are not easily or readily separated from their histories. Instead, as Bannon suggests, they project and reflect an accumulation of experiences. For example, videotaped lessons – although relatively new in teacher education – carry and convey a culture of teacher learning through others’ practices. In their relatively short careers as teaching/learning tools in teacher education, these “case studies” have typically featured experienced teachers teaching isolated, de-contextualized lessons. While teacher educators often do their best to provide the necessary contextual information for these videotaped lessons, teacher learning is nonetheless compromised because of these limitations.

In addition to these issues, outside case studies of experienced teachers typically bring with them a history that does not reflect interns’ history as students or student teachers. Moreover, in terms of discussions of literature, they may not reflect teacher candidates’ current ideas about discussions of literature, particularly as they play out in interns’ field placement classrooms. By contrast, the interns’ own videotaped discussions reflect their experiences, as a student as well as a student teacher in a particular field placement classroom. These experiences, combined with numerous others including conversations with their mentor teachers, other teachers, and other childhood experiences, have shaped their beliefs about discussions and what is possible and not

possible in their field placement classrooms. For these reasons, one important feature of the videotaped discussions is that they came from interns themselves, teaching in their own field placement classrooms.

Related to this feature is the fact that interns' videotaped discussions allowed the interns to tap into a significant, overlapping setting of the broader English methods activity system. Through their own videotaped discussions, interns were able to bring out ideas within and across various activity settings. Engestrom (2000) writes, "An activity system does not exist in a vacuum. It interacts with a network of other activity systems" (p. 10). Although I have argued that interns' combined experiences represent an activity system, each field placement can also be regarded as its own activity system³³. In this sense, interns participated simultaneously in multiple activity systems, all of which informed and shaped what they learned from the others. Because interns had access to the histories of their videotaped discussions, it was available for investigation as they talked and learned about discussions.

A second important and distinct feature of the videotaped discussions as a mediating tool was its capacity to create and sustain interaction between interns' internal and external developmental processes. Using different terminology and examples, Lev Vygotsky distinguished between internal and external development. He showed that tools, such as language, are first used in interaction with others, but then ultimately – and importantly – internalized by the learner. The first, he explained, appears on the *inter-psychological* level, as interaction between people; it then occurs within the learner as an

³³ If we consider the multiple settings and tools – for example, conversations with the mentor teacher, other teachers, other student teachers; texts and materials used in the classroom; interactions with students; and numerous others.

intra-psychological process (1981). According to Vygotsky, both of these processes are necessary for development.

As a mediating tool, the videotaped discussions served both of these processes. In the English methods seminar, interns interacted with each other around the taped lessons. They watched and talked about what they saw in the videotaped discussions in conversations that were directed by the interns themselves. In fact, as noted in Chapter Five, interns typically began the post-videotape debriefings by sharing their research questions with the class. They asked their classmates what they had observed with respect to this research question. From here, the conversation went in any number of directions, as interns mediated with each other over what they had seen. As Leont'ev writes, "Higher psychological processes unique to humans can be acquired only through interaction with others, that is, through inter-psychological processes that only later begin to be carried out independently by the individual" (p. 56, as quoted in Wertsch, p. 226). The English methods seminar served as the setting for interns to *externalize* their ideas, beliefs, thinking, and questions.

As the data chapters suggest, through mediation with each other over the course tools, and particularly the videotaped discussions, interns learned about discussions through inter-psychological (external) and intra-psychological (internal) processes. They carried what they learned across multiple activity settings, including discussions in the seminar, conversations with their peers and mentor teachers, reflective essays, and planning and leading discussions of literature with their students. Weldon (2000) writes that "The individual's own mental processes are transformed as the inter-psychological processes and mediating tools are internalized" (p. 74). Thus, one very critical feature of

the mediating tools of this activity system was their capacity to be transformed from inter-psychological to intra-psychological functions within interns.

This capacity to create and sustain interaction between interns' external and internal development was not limited to the videotaped discussions. For example, because Stacey's primary method of instruction was discussions, interns interacted with each other and, as the data presented earlier suggests, internalized their observations and interactions. In essence, these tools – as well as the course literature and documents – were the internalization of what was externalized in the English methods seminar. Interns left class each week (external activity) and applied what they learned about discussions to planning for and leading their next discussion (internal activity). In this way, the tools served as a vehicle for interns to reveal their internalization in ways that other tools – such as outside case studies or videotaped lessons – would not.

Finally, related to the reciprocal nature of the mediating tools, these particular tools selected traveled across boundaries of the activity system – for example, from the English methods seminar classroom to the field placement and back, and from conversations with mentor teachers to conversations with other interns. If we were to plot the movement of these tools onto some sort of graph, over time the graph would likely resemble a maze or spider's web. As Engestrom writes, "Accounts of learning . . . that only operate with horizontal or 'flat' notions of cognition miss a crucially important resource in failing to explore the particular complementary potentials and limitations of the different levels of mediational means" (1999, p. 6). In other words, by traveling across and between these various activity settings, interns were able to engage with and use the tools in meaningful, productive ways that complemented use in other settings. As

Engestrom suggests, tools that have both vertical as well as horizontal implications will foster deeper learning and development.

In sum, while the tools Stacey planned and used were important, more significant were the features these tools embodied – namely, their historical significance and their ability to create interactions between interns’ external and internal development processes. In addition to these features, the tools of this activity system traversed its various activity settings and systems, which ultimately contributed to the larger goal, that of learning about discussions. However, as the following section will demonstrate, this movement of tools and beliefs across settings generated conflict that served a critically important role in helping interns to learn about discussions.

Conflict and Tension as Catalysts for Learning

Tension, contradiction and conflict played an important role in learning to lead discussions. Earlier in this chapter, I noted how conflicting perspectives about discussions in the English methods activity system facilitated intern understanding. In the context of Leont’ev’s example of the primeval collective hunt, I looked at the contradiction between individual interns’ goal-driven actions (i.e., challenging the literature based on their field placement experiences) and the larger groups’ motive-driven activity (conversations to help them learn about discussions). I concluded that these contradictions provided a rich source of knowledge for interns. In this section, I expand upon this discussion to explore the multi-faced and critical role that tension and conflict played in the English methods activity system.

Because of the overlapping and contradictory nature of activity systems, conflict and tension are inherent and necessary features of activity theory, and therefore of learning and development. Citing Leont'ev (1978), Engestrom, Miettinen, and Punamaki (1999) write:

The internal tensions and contradictions of (an activity) system are the motive force of change and development. They are accentuated by continuous transitions and transformations between these components of an activity system, and between the embedded hierarchical levels of collective motive-driven activity, individual goal-driven action, and automatic operations driven by the tools and conditions of action (p. 9).

Almost without exception, conversations about discussions – in the class, in the field placement classroom, between interns, etc. – were fraught with dissenting perspectives, the “internal tensions and contradictions” of the English methods activity system. Moreover, as we have seen through data analysis, interns’ questions, beliefs and assumptions about discussions continuously transitioned and were transformed across multiple settings of the English methods activity system. As interns engaged in mediation with each other around various course tools, including their personal beliefs, they incorporated and appropriated each other’s ideas into their existing beliefs and experiences regarding discussions of literature. These actions led to disequilibrium, as the embedded hierarchical levels of activity (conversations), action (reading and talking about discussions), and operations (leading discussions in their field placement classrooms) collided with interns’ beliefs. The conflict and stress that ensued ultimately

served as the “engine of change and development” (Cole, Engestrom, and Vasquez, 1997, p. 4) regarding the teacher’s role in discussions of literature.

Conflict and tension were not limited to the relationship between interns or between the instructor and interns. It served as a catalyst for learning between all aspects of the English methods activity system, including peer-to-peer ideas, interns’ beliefs to the instructor’s pedagogy, published scholarship to interns’ beliefs, Middletown University to interns’ placement practices and experiences, videotaped discussions to conversations with mentor teachers, urban to suburban teaching placements, and countless other relationships. In this sense, the English methods program was a healthy, productive activity system. As Cole, Engestrom, and Vasquez (1997) write, “The multi-voiced and multi-layered nature of activity systems is both a resource for collective achievement and a source of compartmentalization and conflict” (p. 4). Since this study focused largely on “collective achievement” regarding the teacher’s role in discussions, I offer the following examples of “compartmentalization and conflict” and how it pushed (or did not push) interns’ thinking and growth.

Perhaps the clearest example of the relationship between conflict, compartmentalization, and achievement began on the first day of the English methods seminar. During that class period, as noted in previous chapters, Stacey provided her students with a clear definition of open discussions, which was based largely on an article by Sorenson (1993). While her definition strongly resonated with some interns’ beliefs, it contrasted with others. From that point forward, interns began to compartmentalize their beliefs, and throughout the semester added evidence from the multi-voiced and multi-layered settings of the English methods activity system to these “compartments.” As they

read or heard or talked about ideas related to discussions, they absorbed them into their existing schema. At times – when interns existing beliefs coincided with new information – this process was seamless. At other times – when interns beliefs conflicted with what they read or talked about – it caused conflict and stress. My interview with Steve provides an example of the latter.

As the semester began, Steve firmly believed that teachers played an active role in discussions. He believed that good discussions were those in which the teacher directed students toward specific instructional objectives. During our interview, Steve talked about instances in which this conception of discussions was challenged, including Stacey's discussions in the English methods seminar. "At times," he explained, "(her) discussion would go off onto a tangent" (Steve interview, 5/2/03, page 4). At the same time, he talked about what he learned through these discussions, and how much he and his classmates benefited and learned from and through Stacey's open format. He also talked about his field placement experiences, and how he believed he had to actively participate in discussions if he expected his students to learn anything from them. Steve talked about private conversations with his colleague, Austin, as well as his mentor teacher, and how these interactions sometimes supported – and at other times refuted – his beliefs about discussions. From the data chapters, we know that Steve, as well as his classmates, learned a tremendous amount from and through this activity system.

Steve's case highlights the contradictory and complementary qualities of the multi-voiced and multi-layered English methods activity settings. Moreover, it illustrates how contradiction served as both a resource for learning as well as a source of conflict and stress. At times, competing views about discussions played a more explicit role in the

activity system, such as the conversation in Chapter Six between Stacey and Stan. In that exchange, interns had complete access to Stan's and Stacey's competing perspectives. Through mediation around the conflict and substance of their conversation, as well as their own beliefs, interns were pushed to think about, clarify, and deepen their understanding of the teacher's role in discussions.

Another way to think about the importance of contradiction in learning to lead discussions is its role in creating disequilibrium for interns. Sprio et al (1988) writes that "advanced knowledge acquisition" requires that the learner "reason" with material and "apply it flexibly in diverse contexts" (p. 375). The English methods seminar provided interns with diverse, multiple opportunities to apply what they had learned through mediation with each other around the various course tools. For example, when their beliefs collided with what they learned through various tools and settings, they wanted to talk about the disequilibrium they experienced. These conversations about these tools – with their classmates, the instructor, their mentor teacher, and others – ultimately led interns to deepen their understanding of discussions and the teacher's role in leading them.

In the exchange between Stan and Stacey, as well as every other lesson and discussion I have analyzed, conflict between interns' field placement experiences, beliefs about discussions, and the tools of the seminar facilitated interns' growth and development. In many cases, it was the conflict they experienced that actually *engaged* students, made them want to participate in conversations with the instructor and their classmates, inside or outside of the classroom. Two prime examples of conflict-inspired conversations were Emily and Danielle's long drives between Denton and Lincoln, and

Steve and Austin's dinners together each Wednesday night after class. In both cases, interns were motivated by something that was said in class, with which they disagreed. In these examples, conflict played a central role in stimulating conversation and, subsequently, growth and development around discussions. Perhaps more important was the interaction conflict created between interns' internal and external development around discussions of literature.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, one important feature of the mediating tools was their ability to create and sustain interaction between internal and external development. Given this, we might think of conflict as a tool that created rich interactions between these two processes. As interns moved from and across various settings of the English methods activity system, they carried with them beliefs about discussions that conflicted with what they saw and learned from other settings and their classmates' experiences. As the data chapters have shown, this conflict enhanced learning because it forced interns to challenge their beliefs, talk about them with their classmates, write about them in written reflections, and use what they learned in one setting to inform what they did or talked about in others. In these and countless other ways, conflict played a critically important role in expanding interns' understanding of discussions and their role in leading them. But what about the role of conflict in shaping interns' beliefs about students in diverse, urban schools? It is to this question I turn in the following section.

The "White Elephant": Conflicting Beliefs about Students in Diverse, Urban Schools

When dysfunctional families avoid talking about the source of their dysfunction – for example, an alcoholic parent – psychologists and others often use the “white

elephant” metaphor to illustrate their avoidance. They explain that avoiding the dysfunction is like a white elephant sitting in the middle of the family room that everyone walks by and sees but which no one talks about or questions. With some exceptions, the white elephant is an equally useful metaphor for interns’ beliefs (often negative) about students in diverse, urban schools and classrooms. In other words, although the topic was frequently broached, it was only rarely engaged and debated: Moreover, when beliefs about diverse, urban students *were* discussed, interns often disassociated themselves from – or avoided – any related conflict.

A good example of such avoidance occurred during a conversation in the English methods seminar that followed Matt’s videotaped discussion. Although several students participated in the discussion that Matt led in his placement classroom, many others did not. Following the discussion, one of Matt’s classmates asked if he had tried different strategies to get more students involved, like awarding participation points. Below is a transcript of the conversation that followed:

Matt: I tried to do that. I’ve got a lot of Asian students in my class, and part of their culture, especially for the girls, is very reserved and quiet. They don’t, they’re not outgoing people just by their cultural practices, and it’s hard to get them to talk, to go out onto a limb. And we did, I had them get into small groups. I found that if I put them into the groups, there is some success.

Maggie: It’s interesting that you bring that up, the cultural stuff.

Matt: It is. Empire is very culturally diverse. A lot of kids from all sorts of different backgrounds.

Emily: I don't think it's such a bad thing to recognize that in your classroom. Um, because you're in such a diverse environment, um, it is a part of their culture. I mean, I have some really quiet students as well, so I'm realizing that, you know, they're really smart on paper, and they're pretty reserved and they're really good listeners during discussions. And you know what, they're strength might be on paper, while others will be during discussions, and that's okay. So I don't think that's such a bad thing.

Matt: Yeah, I agree. And there was one student in particular who I knew this would be a challenge, but on paper you could see that she got it.

Following Matt's final response, the discussion turned to the strategy of awarding participation points during discussions. Interns' views about culturally diverse students – in this case Asian-American students – went unchallenged. Rather than engage in a potentially contentious discussion about the relationship between culture and discussions of literature, interns moved to a more neutral topic. This example, along with numerous others, suggests that it may have been the *absence* of substantive conflict that left interns' beliefs about students in diverse, urban schools unchanged. In other words, because interns did not engage in conflict-laden conversations around these issues with their peers, they had few opportunities to challenge or expand upon their potentially caustic beliefs about students.

At the same time, this avoidance does not mean that interns did not think about these issues internally, or intra-psychologically. In fact, as the case of Stephanie (from Chapter Five) demonstrated, interns frequently experienced conflict within themselves,

and may have even developed on this level. However, as the earlier discussion regarding the relationship between internalized and externalized development pointed out, learning happens when internal and external processing interact with each other. In the English methods activity system, these interactions were encouraged through mediation around various course tools in conjunction with the multi-layered and multi-voiced activity settings. In short, while interns had multiple opportunities to mediate with each other around tools related to discussions, they had only limited opportunities to interact with each other around tools such as beliefs about culturally, linguistically, or socially-diverse students.

Another example of the avoidance of conflict occurred in the context of a discussion around Gena's videotaped discussion. Gena is a white female who taught in a predominantly African-American school and classroom. By her own testimony, Gena did not have much familiarity or experience with people of color, in her own schooling or otherwise. In the videotaped discussion we watched together in the seminar, several students are talking at the same time, over each other, with very few listening to what anyone is saying. At times, students are almost screaming. During the excerpt we watched, Gena said very little, and what she did say was difficult to hear. Thus, whether or not meaningful dialogue took place was difficult to determine, as it was virtually impossible to understand what anyone was actually saying. After about ten minutes, Gena stopped the tape and debriefed the discussion with her classmates.

Gena explained that her goal was to sequence the lesson in order to promote thoughtful student deliberation. She asked her seminar classmates, "So, what did you think? Did they get to the deeper levels of thinking? Should I have jumped in? Should I

not have jumped in?” Overwhelmingly, students shared that Gena should have taken more control of the discussion. For example, Penelope said, “I don’t really have any idea how you would get them to, like, settle down, and talk more one at a time, but in order to think more deeply, I think they have to settle down and listen” (Transcript, p. 46).

Curiously, although Gena had privately conveyed to me that much of her reluctance to take control of discussions was based on her lack of understanding of her students’ backgrounds and experiences, she shared none of this with her classmates. Neither did they, even though many of them held similar beliefs (as noted in Chapter Five in the case of Stephanie). Thus, for Gena, Matt, and many of their classmates, the unwritten rule of the course seemed to be “avoid conflict related to beliefs about culturally diverse students.”

The lack of interaction among tools such as interns’ beliefs about students, and between interns’ internal and external developmental processes, left them few opportunities to meaningfully challenge and transform their views about students in diverse, urban schools. In some cases, for example when interns taught in the same school – as was the case with Matt, Steve, and Austin – there were some opportunities. In these cases, interns could draw on and talk about their beliefs in the context of multiple activity settings. But for most of the interns, these opportunities were few and far between. When it came to beliefs about students, conflict and contradiction were not embraced as they were with discussions of literature. Instead, interns treated them as white elephant, and therefore learned and changed very little during their semester in the course.

In sum, the data suggest that teacher educators need to see conflict, contradiction and tension as productive sites for learning, as instrumental to learning about teaching. In the “Implications” section of this chapter, I will address this issue in more detail. For now, I turn to a final theme that emerged in looking across my data and findings, which is the role of “unplanned” tools that surfaced in the course. In the following paragraphs I demonstrate the many ways in which these tools contributed to interns’ development in learning to lead discussions.

“Planned” and “Unplanned” Tools

The above two sections point to the significance of the particular tools used in the English methods seminar and how the interaction among the tools fostered intern learning. Both sections also suggest that learning involved *both* the particular tools intentionally chosen for the course – the literature and the videotaped discussions – *and* a set of “unplanned” tools that came with the various settings of the activity systems. These unplanned tools include the interns’ beliefs about leading discussions of literature, the questions they raised in class, learnings from prior coursework, experiences they had teaching in their various placement settings, the beliefs and practices of their cooperating teachers, and intern-intern conversations outside of class. What role did these unplanned tools play in the activity system? How does activity theory as a way of understanding intern learning account for unplanned tools? In the following paragraphs I examine the roles of three unplanned tools – the autobiographical narratives, student-initiated discussions, and interns’ beliefs about students in diverse, urban schools.

Although discussion was a focal point of the English methods seminar, not every task and assignment revolved around this theme. Within the first month of the course, as noted in Chapter Six, interns wrote autobiographical narratives regarding their beliefs about teaching and learning. As noted in that same chapter, interns shared these narratives with each other. Many of them, including Kathy, talked about the value of these narratives in creating a stronger classroom community. She explained, “I think the narratives brought us closer together . . . we could talk openly about our teaching and not feel as though we were attacking each other. In other words, we could critically examine our teaching practice, largely because we knew each other as people” (Kathy Interview, p. 7).

In this sense, we can see the role the narratives played as an unplanned tool in the English methods activity system. They helped turn the class into a community, and thereby made conversations about discussions more possible and productive. Although Kathy talks about the narratives in terms of the videotaped discussions, the same could easily be said about the course literature and documents and Stacey’s pedagogy. By helping to create a close and comfortable community, the narratives facilitated honest conversations among and between interns and the instructor. In this way, the autobiographical narratives played an important, if unplanned role in creating a community where interns could challenge each other’s ideas and practices.

A second unplanned tool in the English methods activity system was student-initiated conversations. In Chapters Four, Five, and Six, I presented numerous excerpted discussions from the seminar. In most cases, conversations were initiated by interns rather than the teacher. At times, they asked questions that prompted conversation. At

Other times, interns commented on something they had read in the literature or seen in the videotaped discussions. For example, in Chapter Four, in response to an article interns had read, Danielle asks: “How can you truly assess an open discussion?” Danielle’s question, as I explain in that chapter, initiated a conversation that very quickly led interns to talk about discussions and assessment in very sophisticated ways. These early conversations, and those that followed, ultimately served as the primary source of intern learning in the course.

Since I did not interview Stacey, I cannot say for certain whether student-initiated conversation was an unplanned tool. At the same time, unless Danielle was a plant who was specifically asked by Stacey to ask that question, we have no reason to assume Stacey *could* have planned such an event – including the discussion that followed – even if she had wanted to. As I demonstrated in Chapter Four, the discussion that followed Danielle’s question was compelling and engaging. From it, new knowledge and insight flowed, as interns shared examples and experiences from the field along with beliefs they had about discussions. Throughout Chapter Four and the other data chapters, I offered countless similar interactions, many of which began with an observation or question from one of the interns.

These student-initiated conversations lead me to conclude that unplanned tools played a central role in helping interns to learn about discussions and the teacher’s role in leading them. While interns often enacted these unplanned tools in the context of planned tools, it seems clear from data across this study that much of what interns learned happened serendipitously. That is, it happened not as a direct result of anything the instructor did or did not plan and do, but as an unplanned outgrowth of those plans. Thus,

in order to understand intern learning from an activity theory perspective, we must **examine** the opportunities interns had to engage in discussion with their classmates **around** authentic tasks that had meaning and relevance to their lives and, in this case, **their** field placement experiences.

While these unplanned tools – the autobiographical narratives and student-initiated conversations – played a significant role in the activity system, others did not. A **prime** example of this was interns' beliefs about students in diverse, urban schools. As **the** previous four chapters suggest, interns seemed to distinguish between discussions in **middle-class**, suburban schools and classrooms and more diverse, urban schools and **classrooms**. While their individual views varied, they generally believed that what was **possible** in the former was not always possible in the latter; and vice versa. The same was **often** true for grade level. That is, interns who worked with middle school students did **not** necessarily believe they could use or apply what they learned from their classmates who taught in high school classrooms.

Although interns' beliefs about students clearly shaped how and what they did in **their** field placement classrooms, they played a relatively insignificant role in course **discussions**. In other words, while interns may have engaged intra-psychologically, or **internally**, with these beliefs, they had few opportunities in the English methods activity **system** to engage with them inter-psychologically, or externally. The course offered **limited** opportunities for interns to engage in mediation with each other around tools **focused** on beliefs about diverse students in urban schools. While aspects of this topic **were** raised and addressed in the context of the videotaped discussions, these

conversations were almost always tangential to the “main” discussion – that is, discussions of literature.

As I began this study, my goal was to learn how interns learned to lead discussions of literature with their students. Moreover, because so many interns with whom I had worked talked about the challenges of leading discussions in diverse, urban schools, I wanted to focus on teacher learning in these settings. As I look across my findings, and as I have explained already in this chapter, the focus of intern learning has been around discussions of literature. Through mediation with each other around various course tools, interns developed a rather complex understanding of discussions and their role in leading them. The seminar provided them with multiple settings and opportunities to challenge their beliefs about discussions and engage thoughtfully around these issues. The course did not, however, provide the same opportunities to challenge and talk about beliefs about students in diverse, urban schools. For this reason, for the most part, interns’ beliefs changed very little, if at all, during the semester.

This finding raises important questions about the selection of tools in activity systems. Given what I have learned through this study, I am convinced that had the focus been on teaching in diverse, urban schools, interns would have had numerous opportunities to engage in thoughtful mediation with each other around what this means. They would have had opportunities to challenge their beliefs, and deepen their understanding of students different from themselves in terms of race, ethnicity, or social class. They would have been able to build upon what they learned in prior courses to develop a pedagogy of leading discussions that responded to students’ needs and interests. However, because interns’ beliefs about students in diverse, urban schools were

an unplanned tool that played a minimal role in the larger activity system, students did not deepen their understanding of students in the way they did discussions of literature.

As I have tried to show in this section, the unplanned tools of the English methods activity system played an interesting, unpredictable role in teacher learning. While the autobiographical narratives and student-initiated conversations played a significant role in this process, interns' beliefs about students in diverse, urban schools did not. How can we account for these differences? Why did some unplanned tools play a more significant role than others? If some unplanned tools play such significant roles in teacher learning, how do we plan for them, or can we? What is the relationship between planned tools (such as the videotaped discussions and the course literature) and unplanned tools in the larger activity system? In the following section, I will consider these and other questions as I apply what I have learned through this study to the broader field of teacher education. In addition to these questions, I will consider issues of breadth verses depth in teacher education, the role of teacher educator's pedagogy in shaping teacher learning, the relationship of field placement to the broader activity system, the selection and use of tools in teacher education activity system, and the importance of trust in learning to teach.

Implications for Teacher Education

Although my study focused on teacher learning in a secondary English methods course, we can apply my findings to other content areas in elementary and secondary education. Moreover, I believe my focus on a specific instructional strategy, discussions, has both theoretical and practical implications for how we might think about and organize courses in teacher education programs. In this section, I address these implications. First,

I identify and describe five practical implications of my work for teacher educators. They are: 1) breadth versus depth in teacher education methods courses; 2) teacher education pedagogy as a learning model for teachers; 3) the relationship between field placements and TE activity systems, particularly for the preparation of urban education; 4) the selection and use of tools that will best facilitate teacher learning; and 5) trust that our students will ask important questions and raise relevant issues. Following this discussion, I conclude my paper with some theoretical implications of thinking about a teacher education program as an activity system; what it allows us to see, as well as the limitations.

Practical Implications for Teacher Education

One implication raised by my study and findings relates to the issue of depth versus breadth in a teacher education course. Interns in the English methods seminar became deep thinkers about their practice. They took ownership of their learning and talked about their practice in thoughtful, productive ways. But were they able to do this because of the focus on discussions throughout the semester? Based on my research and findings, it seems that if we want our pre-service teachers to become deep thinkers, we need to focus on specific instructional strategies that will allow them to get beneath the surface of teaching and learning. In the case of the English methods seminar, Stacey's focus on discussions of literature seemed to provide interns with such opportunities.

To what extent, we must ask ourselves, did the focus on one topic facilitate interns' learning? In addition, did the focus on a particular strategy create structures for interns to think about other skills and teaching methods? While my study clearly

illustrates that interns developed rather sophisticated ways of reflecting upon their practice of leading discussions, it is unclear whether they developed the same capacity with respect to other instructional methods. Further studies might investigate these issues and questions.

A second practical implication for teacher education is the need for teacher educators to reflect the pedagogy being taught. In this study, we saw how much interns picked up and thought about with respect to Stacey's pedagogy, whether she intended it or not. In this sense, pedagogy is a tremendous teaching resource that is under-utilized in teacher education programs. Here we might ask ourselves several questions, including: How might teacher education programs balance the planned curriculum with what students bring to it in terms of beliefs, questions, experiences, etc.? How much more powerful might instructor pedagogy be if it is more explicitly addressed? What are the limitations of spending too much time talking about the pedagogy of teacher education?

A third implication for teacher education programs is the need for more discussion around and placements in urban schools and classrooms. As my study suggested – and the research literature supports – field placements played a critically important role in helping interns learn to lead discussions. It provided them with a site to “test out” what they talked about in the seminar, as well as a source of experiences with which they could share with their classmates. If we are serious about preparing teachers to work in settings and contexts with which they may be unfamiliar – for example, diverse, urban classrooms – then we must provide opportunities for them to work in and learn from and through these contexts. This implication raises some additional questions, including: How do different field placement experiences lead to different learning

opportunities? How do we prepare teachers for urban schools in ways that do not reinforce stereotypes? And finally, does preparation for urban schools require a different type of teacher preparation?

A fourth implication of my study for teacher education is the need for thoughtful selection of mediating tools or artifacts. Given what we have learned about activity systems, including their overlapping structure and the ways in which tools are carried from one setting to another, teacher educators need to think hard about which specific tools will best facilitate teacher learning. In particular, we need to consider and select tools that will be meaningful to students, will cause sufficient disequilibrium, will have relevant history, and will help interns to cross over the various boundaries of their teacher education activity systems. Although the tools of the activity system in this study were selected rather serendipitously – by the teacher as well as myself, the researcher – they nonetheless lead the reader to conclude that not all mediating tools are equal in terms of fostering growth and development in beginning teachers.

And finally, my study suggests that teacher educators need to trust that their students will ask the important questions, will raise the relevant issues, and will take advantage of opportunities for growth and development. As my study demonstrated, however, this is not a simple or straightforward process. Learning to teach is complicated work; effective teacher educators, like Stacey, will need to create classrooms in which their students can be teachers at the same time they are learners. Creating such classrooms requires a tremendous amount of trust on the part of the teacher educator. My study raises the question: How can we achieve this degree of trust? And, how might we organize teacher education programs in order to develop trust between teacher candidates

and their instructors? While my study partly addresses these and related questions, it also suggests the need for more research into what it means to create and sustain a trust-based classroom.

Theoretical Implications for Teacher Education

Although my study is more than anything a study of teacher learning, it is also a study of the uses and limitations of socio-cultural activity theory as a framework for *understanding* teacher learning. In this final section of my paper, I'd like to address some of the theoretical implications of activity theory as a conceptual framework. In the paragraphs that follow, I draw on evidence from my study to discuss the uses and benefits of activity theory; in other words, what it allows us to see with respect to teacher education. Following this discussion I turn to some of its limitations as a conceptual framework for understanding teacher learning.

Perhaps the most obvious strength of activity theory as a conceptual framework is its use in allowing the researcher to take a broad view of teacher education programs. As the research literature from Chapter One suggested, one of the pitfalls of teacher education programs is its inability to use resources from teacher candidates' field placement experiences to promote learning. As a conceptual framework, activity theory allows the researcher to see – and eventually understand – the interconnectedness of the multiple settings of teacher education. As I began my study, I believed our teacher education program constituted two or three discrete settings (i.e., the seminar, the field placement classroom, etc.). Through activity theory, I was able to discover the numerous other settings for teacher education, and how these settings related to each other.

Moreover, as a conceptual framework, my study helped me to understand how interns borrowed and appropriated tools across the boundaries of these multiple activity settings to deepen their knowledge.

Related to this use is the ability to see the relationship between the intended and unintended goals and curricula of a teacher education program. Activity theory forced me to attend not only to what the instructor wanted to accomplish in the course, but also to what *was* accomplished and *how* these things were accomplished. As a conceptual framework, activity theory led me to see how some of the unintended course tools – for example, Stacey’s pedagogy and the interns’ beliefs – played a significant role in shaping intern understanding. Given our lack of certainty with respect to how pre-service teachers learn to teach, this seems a particularly important theoretical implication.

And finally, in terms of its strengths as a conceptual framework, activity theory seemed to support my intention to do interpretive, naturalistic research. As suggested in Chapter Two, I wanted to understand teacher learning from the perspectives of my participants, and in the context of their lives as pre-service teachers. Given activity theory’s emphasis on looking across settings, and how ideas are exchanged across the boundaries of these settings, I was able to achieve these research goals. As a conceptual framework, activity theory encouraged me to stay open to surprises, which ultimately led to a much deeper and more accurate reflection of my participants’ thoughts, beliefs, and motivations. For this reason, as well as those mentioned above, activity theory seems to provide a rather powerful framework for doing teacher research.

Although its uses as a conceptual framework are numerous and significant, activity theory also has its limitations. One seemingly apparent limitation relates to the

first practical implication described earlier in this chapter – that is, the issue of breadth versus depth. While activity theory did allow me the opportunity to look across multiple activity settings, often at the same time, I now wonder: At what expense? Did my wide view of the English methods activity system at Middletown University preclude me from seeing (and therefore understanding) its tools and settings in more focus or detail? In retrospect, I feel this may have been the case. In other words, by looking across this expansive activity system, I may have failed to notice or understand some of the more nuanced aspects of each tool or setting. Without question, we must regard this as a potential limitation of activity theory.

And finally, I turn to the issue of how we define “system” when talking about the English methods activity system at Middletown University. On the one hand, as I have described it in this paper, we might think of this system as all-encompassing, as a way to examine and understand virtually every aspect of teacher education. On the other hand, we must ask ourselves: What have we not considered? Are there other activity settings that may have contributed to interns’ understanding of discussions? In this way, a potential limitation of activity theory as a conceptual framework is the mistaken assumption that such a framework captures every aspect of teacher learning. In reality, it cannot; in fact, no such framework exists. Although activity theory allows researchers to look across multiple activity settings – as this study demonstrates – it cannot possibly account for and consider every such setting. Teacher learning is a dynamic and continuous process; the best activity theory can do is direct us to its primary influences, and the relationships between them.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Discussion Rubric for English Interns

(Created by the English Educators Network, 2002)

Categories and Levels of Performance	Does not Meet Expectations	Approaches Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
Planning and Preparation	1. Plans indicate that the intern has a weak understanding of the text(s). 2. Plans do not identify discussion Q's. 3. Plans do not identify any discussion strategies. 4. Plans do not identify strategies to meet student learning needs. 5. Plans do not reflect awareness of possible student misunderstandings. 6. The planned discussion does not relate to previous or future lessons, goals or content.	1. Plans indicate that the intern has a general understanding of the text(s). 2. Plans include a list of possible discussion Q's that may not be focused or clearly connected to goals and purposes. 3. Plans identify one or two discussion strategies. 4. Plans identify some strategy to meet general student learning needs. 5. Plans identify one strategy to address probably student misunderstandings and/or challenging content. 6. The planned discussion relates to previous and future lessons, goals and content.	1. Plans indicate that the intern has a substantive understanding of the text(s). 2. Plans identify discussion Q's that are related to one another and to discussion and unit goals and objectives. 3. Plans identify pre-, during and post-discussion strategies. 4. Plans incorporate a strategy to meet specific student learning needs and interests. 5. Plans identify probably student misunderstandings and strategies to address them. 6. The planned discussion relates to previous and future lessons, and unit goals.	1. Plans indicate intern has researched content and identified multiple interpretations of texts. 2. Plans identify discussion Q's clearly related to one another, to discussion and unit goals, and to the larger issue(s) touched upon in the text. 3. Plans identify pre-, during and post-discussion strategies appropriate to the purposes of the discussion. 4. Plans incorporate multiple strategies to meet diverse student learning needs and interests. 5. Plans identify skills and/or content that students are likely to have difficulty with, and strategies to address these difficulties to further student understanding. 6. Plans clearly indicate a variety of concrete connections between the planned discussion and larger unit and course goals, and between text(s), student lives and larger extra-textual questions.
Questions and Responses	1. Discussion Q's are comprehension level. 2. Discussion Q's are only textual. 3. . Q's are tr-generated.	1. Discussion Q's move beyond comprehension to include some interpretive and higher level Q's. 2. Discussion Q's are mainly textual, with some focus on ss' connection to text. 3. Q's are mostly tr-generated with some s-generated Q's.	1. Discussion Q's include multiple levels of Q's, from comprehension to evaluation. 2. Discussion Q's are both textual and student-centered, with a clear tie to purpose. 3. There is a balance of s. and tr-generated Q's.	1. Discussion Q's include multiple levels of Q's, discussion of genre, style, and aesthetics, and are effectively ordered to scaffold ss' learning and to meet lesson objectives. 2. Discussion Q's are both textual and student-centered, with clear connections between them and to lesson purposes. 3. The balance of s. and tr-generated Q's supports purpose

	4. Students are not asked to support opinions with textual references. 5. Teacher provide evaluative responses to ss' responses 6. Tr. is able to adjust discussion in light of ss' Q's/responses and needs, while maintaining focus and purpose of discussion. 7. Tr. helps s to identify key points of discussion and make connections to larger points and issues.	4. Students might refer to specific textual material when prompted. 5. Teacher uses various response strategies to encourage and further ss' responses (wait time, uptake, probing, etc.) 6. Tr. is able to adjust discussion in light of ss' Q's/responses while maintaining focus and purpose of discussion. 7. Tr. attempts to help ss to identify key points of discussion either verbally or in subsequent assignments.	4. Students usually offer textual or other relevant references to support or refute points of discussion. 5. Tr. and ss. use various strategies to respond to each other's responses to encourage and further other responses. 6. Tr. makes some adjustments to discussion in response to ss' Q's/responses, while keeping discussion on track most of the time. 7. Tr. makes attempt to wrap-up discussion but with little connection to content.	4. Students consistently cite specific textual passages and other relevant references to support their point of view. 5. Tr. and ss. respond to each other's responses to encourage and further other responses; responses are used in follow-up discussions and writing tasks. 6. Tr. sticks rigidly to original discussion plan or is unable to keep discussion on track. 7. No closure to discussion.
Participation Patterns	1. Teacher initiates conversations and asks questions; format typically follows IRE pattern (teacher initiates, student responds, teacher evaluates) 2. Few, if any students participate 3. Only teacher generates questions 4. Students never respond to each other 5. Climate is chaotic, disrespectful 6. Teacher makes no attempt to encourage equitable participation	1. Students sometimes initiate conversations, usually at teacher invitation 2. At least one-quarter of the students participate 3. Students occasionally generate questions 4. Students sometimes respond to each other's contributions 5. Students are orderly and not disruptive 6. Teacher makes an attempt to encourage equitable participation	1. Students initiate some parts of conversation on their own 2. At least half of the students participate to varying degrees 3. Students generate ideas and questions; Teacher primarily facilitates and moderates 4. Students build and elaborate on each other's contributions 5. Students respectfully respond to each other; Most students are paying attention 6. Teacher makes multiple attempts to encourage equitable participation	1. Students take primary responsibility for leading discussion 2. All students participate one or more times 3. Students lead discussion; Teacher participates on equal basis with students 4. Student questions respond to and build on contributions of others, often leading to "ah hah" moments for self or others 5. Students respectfully respond to and challenge each other's contributions; Students are enthusiastic, engaged, and articulate 6. Teacher collects and uses information about student participation to facilitate equitable participation and to assess the nature and quality of student participation

APPENDIX B

Participant Interview Protocol

Explain to intern that I am trying to understand how he/she thinks about leading discussions of literature, and about the learning opportunities he/she has been afforded - with respect to discussions. Explain that I am particularly interested in their thinking and learning as it relates to teaching in diverse, urban schools. Explain that the interview will likely last about 90 minutes, and that any information shared will be kept in confidence. Pseudonyms will be used and all efforts will be employed so that readers cannot identify the context or participants. There is always a chance, however, that someone familiar with the school and/or participants will recognize the school and/or people involved.

To begin, I will ask the intern to set up the discussion we will watch together – what did they want to do, what did they hope to accomplish, why did they believe a discussion would be useful, how did they develop the questions and format, etc.? Also ask them to comment on their rationale, and whether their mentor teacher was present and the role he/she had in the lesson. Finally, ask them what, if anything, from the English methods seminar or from other interns or from other field experiences they used in leading the discussion we will watch together.

Next, explain to intern that we will watch the videotaped discussion together, and that what I would like is for them to stop the tape when they believe the discussion is going well, when it isn't going well, and when they felt they had to make an important decision about how to respond to a student, or about when to change the course of the discussion, or about anything else about which they felt unprepared. Instruct intern that this is just a range of things, but that they should feel comfortable to stop the tape at any other point as well. Once this process is complete, move to the more formal interview questions:

- 1) How did you get to where you are in these videotaped discussions? What experiences from the program – including coursework, placements, interactions with your peers, etc. – has brought you to where you are in these videotaped discussions from your current placement?
- 2) What tools guide your practice of leading discussions? In other words, as you lead discussions of literature, what strategies, methods, tools, ideas, etc., do you draw from to inform both how you plan discussions and how you actually lead them?
- 3) What can you tell me about your students? How has your perception of them changed, if at all, in relation to leading discussions of literature? What do you do differently, if anything, in leading discussions of literature now as opposed to your first placement experiences? What do you do differently than you thought you would do when you started your internship? To what do you attribute these changes?

- 4) Comment on what you have learned over the past several years about teaching and working with culturally, socio-economically, and/or linguistically diverse students in urban schools? What, if anything, do you do different with your students than what you imagined you would do at the start of your internship? To what do you attribute these changes?
- 5) What are some of the conditions, if any, which prevent you from leading the types of discussions you believe are most effective? Why do you believe these are most effective? Why do you believe these things preclude you from leading such discussions?
- 6) How, if at all, did the narrative assignment influence how you think about your teaching practice? How, if at all, did the narrative assignment influence how you think about leading discussions of literature with your students?
- 7) Talk about your own experiences as a student during discussions of literature, both in high school and in your university courses. Did you participate much? What did teachers do to get students involved in discussions? To get students to look closely at the text? To respond to each other? To get students involved in constructing interpretations of literature? What teacher did the best job of leading discussions? What made him/her so effective?
- 8) How has what you have learned this semester informed, complemented, or conflicted with what you had previously believed about leading discussions of literature? In other words, what did you used to believe and how, if at all, have the experiences over the past four months coincided with and/or refuted those beliefs?
- 9) What experiences/interactions over the past four months – in the methods seminar, in your field placement, in conversation with your field instructor, in conversation with your peers or course instructors, etc. – have influenced how you lead discussions of literature with your students? Can you provide some specific examples of things you have learned, and how you have applied those in your practice?
- 10) What have been the more challenging and/or frustrating aspects of leading discussions in your field placement classroom? How, if at all, have you begun to address some of these challenges and/or frustrations?
- 11) If you were to give advice to the intern that will be teaching in your placement classroom next year about leading discussions of literature, what would you say to him/her? Why would these be the things you would share? Why are they so important? Do you think your peers would agree? Why or why not?
- 12) How are you as a teacher different from who you were before you began lead teaching, in terms of leading discussions of literature? To what experiences or opportunities would you attribute these changes?

Thank intern for his/her time. Ask him/her if it would be okay to telephone or e-mail with an additional question or two, some time in the next few weeks.

Name of Intern: _____

Telephone: _____ E-mail: _____

APPENDIX C

English Methods Seminar Discussion Assignment

Overview & Rationale

In the English Methods Seminar, we will continue the work on discussions that we began in previous semesters. Leading effective discussions is one of the most challenging skills of teaching English. That said, learning how to lead discussions takes time, and we do not expect you to master this skill by the end of the internship. Rather, we expect you *to begin a process* of learning how to develop your discussion leading skills. To this end, this assignment is designed to structure and assist your efforts to reflect on and develop your discussion leading skills. It allows you to choose the area/skill of leading discussions you want to focus on, and offers a variety of options for developing this area or skill. In addition, this assignment allows you to benefit and learn from your peers' learnings about leading discussions. Because you will each be studying different area of leading discussions, you will have a variety of different things to teach each other about leading discussions.

Planning Ahead!

This assignment is broken down into 6 steps which will be due along the way and discussed in class. You should plan ahead so that you have opportunities to study the discussions you lead during your lead teaching. We expect that discussions will be a regular form of instruction during your lead teaching (so studying them should not interfere with what you have planned for these 10 weeks). If you need to borrow a video camera to tape your discussions, please arrange to do so in advance.

Throughout the assignment we have modeled what the tasks would look like using a specific example. The example is written in italics at the end of step 1-5.

Step One: Identifying a Discussion Question (to develop your discussion-leading skills)

Due: January 14/15

a) First, identify the question about leading discussions you will investigate this semester. Your question should be big enough to merit ongoing study but specific enough to allow you to make progress towards answering it this semester. Sample questions include (taken from your English methods seminar discussion assignments):

- How do I get more students to participate in class discussions? How do you respond to students who say they have nothing to say?
- Does a discussion require the presence of a teacher? Can a teacher participate in a true discussion?
- How do you get students to respond to each other in a discussion?

- How does the physical set up of the room shape the discussion? How does my physical position in the room affect the discussion?
- Can a good discussion be planned?
- How much of a good discussion is dependent on the teacher versus the students?
- Should participation in a discussion be graded? How does grading or not grading participation in a discussion help or hinder the discussion?
- How do you get students to engage in higher level thinking in a discussion?
- How do I write good discussion questions? How do I get students to ask good discussion questions?
- How do a unit's assessments shape what is discussed in discussions?
- What is the teacher's role in responding to students' responses? How does a teacher validate students' responses without dominating the conversation?
- How do you bring closure to or wrap up a discussion?
- How do you get a discussion to meet your lesson objectives when students lead the discussion?
- Do particular groups of students participate more than others? (by gender, race, class, ability, etc.). What might account for differences in their participation?
- How do I teach students to participate in a discussion?
- How do I use the text at hand in the discussion?

These questions are here to give you an idea of the kind of question you should pursue. You are not limited to this list of questions.

b) After choosing your question, write your current thinking about and experiences with this question.

Example Question: Let's say I choose to pursue the question: How does grading or not grading participation in a discussion help or hinder student participation?

Current Thinking: Thus far, I have not graded students' participation in a discussion. But, I have many students who think that they do not need to participate in the class discussion. I wonder if the fact that their participation is not graded makes them unmotivated to participate. I worry, however, that grading students would force inauthentic contributions, that students would participate only to get their participation points. On the other hand, students only write their five-paragraph essays to get their grade for that, so what is the difference? Why shouldn't participation in a discussion be graded? Isn't it an equally valid way of demonstrating learning and understanding? Why should an essay about a text be graded, but not an oral comment? Maybe by giving a grade for participation I am sending a message that oral communication is as important as written communication.

Step Two: Using the Discussion Rubric

Due: January 14/15 (end of class)

a) Using the rubric, determine specific elements of your discussion issue you could study to help you to learn more about and answer your question. The rubric breaks down different features of leading a discussion and describes what performance looks like for each of these features. Looking at the rubric will help you to determine the features of discussion and areas of performance related to the area of discussion you are studying.

Example: The question of grading students' participation falls mostly under the category of Participation Patterns on the Discussion Rubric. In order to study the impact and effectiveness of grading students' participation, I will need to look at #2, how many students participate in graded and non-graded discussions; #5, how students respond to each other and their degree of attention and engagement in both types of discussion; and #6, my role in encouraging participation in both types of discussion. In addition, my question also deals with #2 in Planning, Preparation and Implementation to see how or if my purpose for discussion is affected by whether or not I grade students' participation in it. I also will need to look at Questions and Response to see if the types of questions and responses students ask and give differ depending on whether or not the discussion is graded or not. For this I will want to focus on #1, the different levels of questions asked, and #2, whether questions are text or student centered.

b) Identify the types of information/data you will need to collect to answer your discussion question. This data can be collected by someone observing your discussions or by you as you watch and analyze your discussion videos (i.e., participation charts; a log of students' responses and the questions asked; an analysis of the teacher's role in the discussion).

Step Three: Reading about Your Question

Due: April 15/16

a) Choose five readings related to your question and the features of discussion identified in step two using the rubric. These readings should help you to think about your question and move you forward in developing a response to it. These readings can come from a variety of sources—from books you have read for other courses, from professional journals (*English Journal* or *English Education*, for example), from articles on trustworthy websites, from recommendations from other English educators, etc. Your English methods seminar instructor will also have some reading on particular topics you can choose from.

b) For each reading, write a response in which you summarize what the reading has to say about your question or issue and how it has informed or changed your thinking about your question. Response should be at least 100 words. For each article/response include complete source information (author, article title, source title (journal, book), year, pages, etc.).

Example: I am going to do an electronic search through English Journal and English Education to see what they has been written about assessing or grading discussions. I am

also going to ask teachers in the English department if they have done any reading on this issue.

If you find readings you think would be helpful for your peers, please pass them on!

Step Four: Studying Discussions in Practice

1st Video Due: February 25/26

2nd Video Due: March 25/26

Another important means of gathering information about your question is to study discussions in practice—your own and those of others. In this step, you will use your own discussions to learn about your question/issue.

a) Design two practice-based inquiries related to your discussion question that you will investigate through analysis of two of your discussions. First, choose two of your discussions that you will videotape. Next, determine a plan for investigating your issue through these discussions. There are several ways you might design these inquiries. Here are some examples:

- If you are studying participation patterns, watch the videotape of your first discussion to see who participates and who does not. Use a chart to keep track of who participates (consider where they are sitting in the room, and other characteristics of the students participating and not). Try to identify the factors that contribute to the different degrees of participation among the different students in the class. For your second videotape, select a strategy you could use to increase participation from quieter students given the factors you identifies from the first videotape. Analyze the second video for participation patterns and the impact of your strategy.
- *Example: To learn more about how grading affects participation, I will videotape a graded and a non-graded discussion and compare the participation patterns, the types of questions and responses students offer, and whether or not the purposes of the discussion were met. I will also survey students about how they felt about their participation after each discussion.*

b) Bring each video, and a copy of the lesson plan used the day of each discussion, your investigation plan and a summary of your results to class on the two due dates. You will have a chance to discuss each other's discussion videos in the English methods seminar.

Step Five: Initial Findings and Feedback

Due: March 25/26

Come to class on March 25/26 prepared to share initial findings and questions to date. During class you will have the opportunity to get feedback and ideas from your classmates about what you are finding and the questions you still have. You should come with a particular question or issue that you would like to discuss with your peers. This feedback is another important source of learning about your question.

Example: After watching my two videotapes, I noted a drastic difference between the two discussions. Students did participate more in the graded discussion. In fact, the surveys indicated that students were glad that they were finally recognized for their contributions. I also think that because students "had" to participate, this got more people talking about made for a more lively and interesting discussion. My question at this point is whether or not I should grade every discussion, and how I make decisions about which ones to grade. I don't want students to ask each time if they will be graded. Do I make this a general part of the course grade that students will be graded on their participation in ALL class discussions? I want to ask my peers about how they assess students' oral participation in class discussions, or any type of class participation.

Step Six: Writing it Up

Due: April 15/16

Prepare a written response to your question about discussion that draws on what you've learned from the readings, the videotapings, class discussions, and the feedback from your peers. Your response should use specific examples from each of these four sources to explain your response. Your response need to provide a definitive "answer" to your question. Instead, it might provide a response that shows many sides of the issue.

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