From “I am” to “we could be”: creating dialogic learning communities in ESOL teacher education

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(Received 1 July 2009; final version received 23 November 2009)

As educators concerned with enacting a critical and humanizing pedagogy, we place emphasis on dialogue as a way to structure our classrooms as authentic sites of democracy, equality and community-building. This study combined a collaborative research partnership with ethnographic methods to investigate one learning community’s efforts to develop and live out a critical and humanizing educational experience in an undergraduate English for Speakers of Other Languages teacher education course in the southeastern United States. Our findings suggest that the course was successful in creating a dialogic learning community where participants, both teachers and students, recognized one another as important knowledge producers. However, a more complex learning community was also revealed, one that struggled to name and examine some of its underlying tensions on occasions when structural and procedural elements of community-building and course work were left unaddressed. Implications of this study suggest that we teacher-learners cannot be selective in our dialogic efforts; we must recognize dialogue as a process of knowing and learning as it relates to both the content and the process of our work.

Keywords: dialogue; humanizing pedagogy; teacher education; English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

While dialogic approaches have been addressed in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) scholarship, the discussion has primarily focused on pedagogy as it relates to working directly with second-language learners in various contexts (Auerbach, 2000; Benesch, 1999; Wong, 2006). In recent years, the field has broadened to include a number of theoretical, conceptual and reflective texts on critical pedagogical approaches in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher education (Johnston, 2002; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Morgan, 2009; Pennycook, 2004; Ramanathan, 2002; Wallerstein & Auerbach, 2004). However, empirical studies providing examples that illustrate and model critical and dialogic practices in ESOL teacher education classrooms are more difficult to find (Hawkins, 2004; Hawkins & Norton, 2009). This gap constitutes the central motivation for our study. Examining demographic trends and the broader social contexts in which pre-service ESOL teachers are socialized in the United States, we find evidence supporting the need for teacher education programmes to employ dialogic and humanizing approaches with pre-service teachers. While the nation’s teaching force continues to

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ISSN 1554-480X print/ISSN 1554-4818 online
© 2011 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/1554480X.2011.563496
http://www.informaworld.com
be largely White (Hodgkinson, 2002), English language learners (ELLs) from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds represent the fastest growing student group in the country (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2007). At the same time, racial violence on school campuses (as witnessed in Jena, LA), reactionary nativist groups like the Campo Minutemen, as well as public policies aimed at dismantling bilingual education, all characterize our national response to diversity and difference. In such a climate, prevailing deficit perspectives towards ethnic, linguistic and cultural difference dominate social institutions such as schools, and taking an advocacy stance that challenges these perspectives is often a lonely and risky endeavour for beginning teachers (Price & Valli, 2005).

Many ESOL teacher education programmes tend to overemphasize teaching methods and address diversity and difference from a liberal perspective that merely promotes understanding and developing awareness of cultural “others” (Banks, 2006). Such liberal perspectives may provide a good first step, but alone they lack the political and ideological clarity (Bartolomé, 1996; Bartolomé & Balderrama, 2001) necessary for providing teachers with the tools to recognize and confront deficit perspectives. Recalling Bartolomé’s (1996) assertion of the need to move “beyond the methods fetish”, we maintain that a decontextualized approach of disseminating methods and “best practices” is insufficient for cultivating educators who are prepared to deal with the complexities of working in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. Rather, this preparation should involve critical frameworks that facilitate examination and critique of the social, cultural and historical contexts in which those practices are imbedded. We argue that discussions of method and pedagogy must be grounded in approaches that model dialogue and community-building. We believe that engaging a dialogic and humanizing pedagogy with pre-service ESOL teachers may facilitate an understanding of how to structure their future classrooms as authentic sites of democracy, equality and community.

As educators thus concerned with enacting a critical and humanizing pedagogy, we approached this study interested in challenging the traditional teacher–student hierarchy (Freire, 1970). In contrast to monologic “banking” approaches to education that view learners as empty vessels waiting to be filled with predetermined facts and information, we place emphasis on building meaningful relationships with students through dialogue and problem posing, and creating a learning community in the process. Drawing from Freire, we conceptualize dialogic education as that which seeks to create spaces where the teachers’ and students’ voices are equally valued; where the knowledge and lived experiences of teachers and students alike serve as a springboard for the joint construction of transformed and transformative knowledge. Such dialogic spaces or learning communities become pedagogical sites of engagement; “culture circles” that entail these elements (Freire, 1973/2005):

Instead of a teacher, we had a coordinator; instead of lectures, dialogue; instead of pupils, group participants... In the culture circles, we attempted through group debate either to clarify situations or to seek actions arising from that clarification. (p. 38)

Participants in culture circles collectively contribute to the teaching and learning process through candid dialogue with one another. Furthermore, it is critical to acknowledge that such learning communities are political spaces, as participants are ideologically oriented towards acting on their world to improve it.

Our purpose in this collaborative study was to examine the development of a dialogic learning community in the context of an undergraduate ESOL teacher education course at
a research university in the southeastern United States. The semester course, Language and Culture in the Classroom, challenged students to examine various perspectives concerning school achievement of linguistically and culturally diverse students and to expand their notions of what it means to develop a multicultural perspective regarding teaching and learning. The title of this paper refers to how course assignments, such as the writing and sharing of “I am” poems and cultural autobiographies, contributed to a dialogic pedagogy that encouraged participants to connect course concepts to their own lived experiences in creative, meaningful and transformative ways.

Perspectives
This study is grounded in critical and humanizing approaches to education as articulated in Freire’s work (1970, 1973/2005) and further developed by scholars such as Bartolomé (1996) and hooks (1994, 2003). Freire’s critical pedagogy stresses historical self-determination of individuals and communities through dialogue and problem posing that engage learners’ lived experiences while seeking to interrogate the relationship among knowledge, authority and power. Bartolomé (1996) described a humanizing pedagogy as one that “values students’ background knowledge, culture, life experiences, and creates learning contexts where power is shared by students and teachers” (p. 248). Bartolomé and Balderrama (2001) further developed this notion, adding that a humanizing pedagogy is also “driven by a political and ideological quest for greater social justice” (p. 52).

Dialogue is the cornerstone of Freire’s pedagogy. For Freire (1970), dialogue “is the encounter between men [human beings], mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (p. 69). The fundamental condition of the act of knowing is its dialogical relation (Freire, 1998a). For us, dialogue is politically engaged, informed by both reflection and action, and committed to transforming oppressive relations in education. It involves shared inquiry and meaning making, and stands in stark contrast to authoritarian banking that eschews dialogue for one-way transmission of knowledge from teachers to students. Education as transmission maintains rigid boundaries between teacher/student, knowledge producer/consumer, and mirrors other oppressive relations in society. Dialogue, on the other hand, “marks the democratic position between them” (Freire, 1998a, p. 117). This is not to imply that dialogue places teachers and students on the same footing, or that there are equal power relations between them. What it does imply is a sincere, fundamental climate of respect on the part of teachers and students, “one that is born of just, serious, humble, and generous relationships, in which both the authority of the teacher and the freedom of the students are ethically grounded” (Freire, 1998b, p. 86). While the teacher needs to be authoritative – that is, “knowledgeable, clear, and direct” (Nieto, 1999, p. 143) – in sharing her understanding of the content with the students, she must be humble enough to be disposed to relearn that which she thinks she already knows, through interaction with the students. The authority which the educator enjoys must not be allowed to degenerate into authoritarianism. In this process, it is essential that teachers and students know that open, curious, respectful questioning, whether in speaking or listening, is what grounds them mutually.

For all its transformative potential, dialogue must not be misunderstood as a mere method or technique for promoting conversation and discussion among learners. When this is the case, isolated individual experiences dominate; and dialogue devolves into conversation or “idle chatter” that has lost its connection to co-constructing knowledge. Too frequently, though, educators revel in this achievement of incorporating multiple voices and personal experiences in the classroom without connecting these experiences to the object of their collective inquiry or examining them in relation to broader social realities. This
fails to understand that dialogue constitutes both a process of learning and a way of knowing, what Freire and Macedo (1996) refer to as “an epistemological relationship” (p. 202). Reducing dialogue to a noncommittal “chewing the fat” (Freire, 1998a, p. 117) or simply a discussion about individuals’ lived experiences would strip it, on the one hand, from the necessary political and ideological reflection on those lived experiences, and on the other, from a clear focus on the object of knowledge and the indispensable methodological rigor to engage with it. And true dialogue, for us and for Freire, could dispense with either: “there is no educational practice without content” (1998a, p. 112), Freire insisted.

Freire and Macedo (1996) asserted that one of the greatest challenges of practising a critical and humanizing pedagogy involves balancing the inclusion of individual lived experiences while “creating pedagogical spaces where students become apprentices in the rigors of exploration” (p. 208). As this balance is successfully achieved, the rigid boundaries that define teacher and learner become blurred as participants engage in the joint construction of knowledge. Such work recognizes teaching and learning as contributing to the larger project of education as the practice of freedom, a liberatory and humanizing experience where students and teachers connect learning to their lives in meaningful ways (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). They create and question new understandings that arise from their interactions with others and in relation to the world. A relational analysis between individual experiences and social, political and historical realities forms the basis for naming our worlds and moving towards social praxis. In this process of “becoming more fully human” (Freire, 1970, p. 55), a healthy balance of concern and imagination, critique and hope combine to engage learners in an active process of education and social inquiry. Such opportunities are critical in increasingly multicultural and multilingual contexts.

Study context and scope

There is a growing body of literature within the fields of TESOL, applied linguistics, and second language acquisition that addresses critical theoretical stances around language use, language teaching and language planning (e.g., Auerbach, 2000; Firth & Wagner, 1997, 2007; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pennycook, 2001; Phillipson, 1992; Reagan, 2005; Tollefson, 2002; Wallace, 2003). However, empirical studies promoting “critical pedagogical relations” (Hawkins & Norton, 2009, p. 33) in ESOL teacher education (that is, studies of dialogic practices, or of the conceptual and practical consequences of a dialogic approach to ESOL teacher education) are more difficult to find (Johnston, 2000). Among the empirical literature addressing “critical pedagogical relations”, we note the studies by Crookes and Lehner (1998), Johnston (2000), and Willett and Miller (2004). The three accounts are set in graduate-level classroom contexts, and many of the participants (students) were already practising ESOL teachers. These studies foreground the process of engaging in dialogue, whether as a teaching approach between teachers and students (Crookes & Lehner, 1998; Johnston, 2000) or as the interaction among students (Willett & Miller, 2004). The “how-to” (the features and manifestations) of teaching and interacting dialogically within their respective contexts was detailed and examined. However, none of the studies explicitly addressed dialogue as a process of learning and a way of knowing, what Freire and Macedo (1996) referred to as “an epistemological relationship” (p. 202), that is, a discussion of whether dialogue facilitated content learning is absent. Thus, while the studies above are relevant accounts that advance the potential of teaching and learning dialogically, the field deserves further exploration spanning other contexts, such as ESOL pre-service teacher education and other applications of dialogue that consider more
specifically its relation to content learning and knowing. Our study aims to contribute to filling in those gaps.

This collaborative study investigated the attempts of one learning community’s efforts to develop and live out a critical and humanizing educational experience in an undergraduate ESOL teacher education course at a research university in the southeastern United States. The study examined the process of building an engaged dialogic learning community, a culture circle (Freire, 1973/2005) where teacher and students jointly construct knowledge and meaningful relationships. Throughout the semester, we examined the roles the participants adopted in our weekly class sessions, as well as the evolving characteristics, qualities and configurations of the learning community.

The course – Language and Culture in the Classroom – is one of three required courses offered at both the undergraduate and graduate levels for students pursuing the ESOL teaching endorsement. This programme provides “add-on” certification to teach ESOL in Grades P–12 in the state’s public schools. The endorsement programme is only valid for educators who have or will hold a teaching credential in another subject area, a speech and language pathology professional certificate, or school counselling credential. The other two courses in the programme cover ESOL teaching methods, curricular and materials design, and first and second language acquisition and development. Objectives of the Language and Culture in the Classroom course include developing an understanding of socio-cultural factors that promote and impede school achievement for diverse learners, gaining critical perspectives on curriculum, pedagogy and learning, and identifying tools and approaches that enable teachers to link theory with practice in order to create responsive learning environments. Greg structured the course as an inquiry experience for examining concepts of language and culture and their relationships to teaching and learning in US public schools. Course assignments such as the “I am” poems and cultural autobiographies were designed to facilitate students developing a relational perspective across personal experiences, social norms and course readings that introduced critical views on culture, learning, privilege, equity and other topics related to teaching culturally diverse students.

Of the 15 students enrolled in the class during this study, five were non-education majors. There were 11 female European Americans, two male European Americans, one African-American female and one Asian-American female. During the second class-session, we discussed details of the study and assured students that participation was expressly voluntary and would in no way impact their grades in the course. Eleven students, herein designated by pseudonyms, returned signed consent forms to participate in the study. The Institutional Review Board approval permitted use of course materials and student work.

**Methods**

The study is grounded in traditions of teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Gitlin et al., 1992) and consisted of a collaborative research partnership combining ethnographic methods (semi-structured interviews and participant observation; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Harklau, 2005) and our “debriefing dialogues”, which were sessions where we researchers sought to make sense of the experience by sharing our observations and critiquing each other’s assertions. In order to gain a multilayered perspective of the developing classroom culture, the data set also included collected student work, postings to the course blog, and course evaluation comments.

Greg, a White middle-class male from the United States, served as the instructor for the course and maintained a reflective journal that probed his efforts to enact a dialogic and
humanizing pedagogy. Erika, a multiracial middle-class female from Brazil, observed and actively participated (contributing her thoughts and experiences during class discussions) in all but two of the class sessions, took extensive field notes, and conducted interviews with five student volunteers at the end of the course. While we came to the study with the common purpose of conducting collaborative research, it would be inaccurate to describe this simplistically as a “teacher–researcher” collaboration. Such a characterization overemphasizes our positions as being distinct and separate roles and neglects to recognize the recursive and interrelated nature of teaching and research. Freire (1998b) articulated this clearly, asserting that “research is not a quality in a teacher nor a way of teaching [but] part of the nature of teaching practice” (p. 133). Within the TESOL field, the split between teaching practice and research on teaching has been much discussed over the past decade, with the TESOL organization at the forefront of efforts to bridge this gap by promoting the concept of the teacher-as-researcher (Stewart, 2006). In our case, since both of us have taught for many years and have conducted other research studies, the term teachers’ research (Stewart, 2006) is an accurate description of our roles and our collaborative interactions in this study.

Recent studies in TESOL and multicultural education have employed various configurations of research partnerships across a variety of contexts and institutional arrangements. Traditional university–school partnerships have been used to examine opportunities for language learning in elementary school contexts (Hawkins & Legler, 2004; O’Connor & Sharkey, 2004) as well as the development of a heritage language programme for secondary students (Brito, Lima, & Auerbach, 2004). In terms of content, Assaf and Dooley (2006) conducted a collaborative study very similar to ours, investigating how instructional practices in a graduate-level multicultural education course encouraged students to “explore their own cultures, appreciate differences, and transform their previously held views and assumptions about multiculturalism” (p. 42). However, aside from mentioning Dooley’s role as participant observer and data collector in the study, the nature of the collaboration and the role it played in contributing to the authors’ understandings is left unspecified.

While we recognize similarities between our work and the studies mentioned above, we see this study as more aligned with that of Doecke, Gill, Illesca, and Van de Ven (2009). Their study focused on the role of dialogue in a secondary literature classroom in Australia, but the authors also acknowledged both the professional learning that occurred between Illesca (the “researcher”) and Gill (the “teacher) as a result of their ongoing dialogue, as well as the impact of that dialogue on the study. Like Illesca, Erika played the role of a “critical friend” (Doecke et al., p. 12) throughout the study; her fieldnotes and observations often served as cues that prompted our collaborative “debriefing dialogues”, which we view as unique contributing factors of this study. The dialogues facilitated both data generation and analysis. As we engaged in these dialogues and discussed our developing perceptions with one another, we not only came to clearer understandings, but also created new texts to be analysed in the process. For us, the collaboration was fluid and recursive throughout the study; our dialogical relationship extended beyond our debriefing sessions into the formal analysis and throughout the process of writing and reflecting on this article. Additionally, our unique subjectivities allowed for a rich, multilayered perspective that we feel minimized the risks of privileging one view over the other.

We analysed data using an inductive coding system to identify relevant themes and categories. Holistic (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) and connecting (Maxwell, 2005) strategies were used to look for relationships that connected statements and events within the context into a coherent whole. We read and re-read all data, both individually and collaboratively, looking for concurring and divergent perspectives in the data. We triangulated our findings.
across fieldnotes, interview transcripts, student work, the class blog, and the instructor’s
reflective journal. Near the end of the semester, we wrote an initial case summary and
shared it with students via the course blog and through email. We invited students to edit,
add and make changes to the document. While several students made general comments of
agreement with the record, they offered no substantive changes.

In the following section, we present our findings and discussion in the form of a dia-
logical exchange. This approach constitutes a deliberate effort on our part to emphasize
two key considerations we bring to our work. The first is our understanding of dialogue
as an essential component of learning and knowing. In other words, we recognize that by
extending the dialogue through our interaction with each other, articulating and listening
to how the other names and understands the experience, we continue in the joint construc-
tion of knowledge together. This leads directly to the second consideration that affirms that
although the actual course may be finished, the learning and understanding we take from
the experience continues to evolve as long as we engage with it. Our dialogical exchange
combines our own unique perspectives that articulate and discuss the development of this
study, the paths we forged, as well as our common findings. At one level, this reflects what
“we could be” as co-researchers. More significantly, at another level, we hope our dialogue
also brings out and echoes the students’ voices in our learning community; what “we could
be” as teacher-students and student-teachers. Thus, it is critical to note that our dialogical
framework seeks to be emblematic of the dialogical attempts and aspirations among and
between students, teachers and researchers throughout the course.

In using a dialogical framework, we draw directly from and acknowledge similar
approaches by Freire and Shor (1987), Freire and Macedo (1996), and Horton and Freire
in the same way, we begin our dialogue here by introducing ourselves and some of the
subjectivities we bring to this work using pieces of our own “I am” poems.

“This class was informally formal”

Erika: I am from the up-and-down-and-all-around that wants to be a little from the hot,
sandy, summer beaches of dear homeland Recife, a little from the snowy winters of
childhood New Jersey, a little from the red clay of the friendly welcoming Goiás of
my teenage years, but ends up being mostly from Brazil’s vast impersonal central
plateau in capital city Brasília. I am from pilgrimage and transience.

Greg: I am from the red clay of North Carolina that never leaves you (or your clothes).
I am from the white sandy beaches of the Gulf Coast of Florida and the crisp fall
landscapes of the Blue Ridge that captivate my senses and connect me to the Earth.

Erika: I am a teacher and translator by training. A preacher’s kid, having literally been all
over the place, always moving around, by the time I started college in Brazil I had
attended 11 schools in two cities in the United States and six cities in Brazil. . . My
three children were born in three different cities.

Greg: I am WHITE, male, middle-class and privileged all the way around. And I have
also stood in solidarity with the families of los desaparecidos, los indígenas de
Guatemala, and the migrant farmworkers of the US’s southeastern fields. These are
the experiences that shape the lens I bring to my work as a teacher and a researcher.

Erika: We may seem worlds apart, but our common interest in exploring the poten-
tial of critical pedagogies has brought us together. I was drawn to this study as
a participant observer because I wished to examine the interaction among you
(the teacher) and the students for signs and evidence of an engaged, dialogic
learning community in the making. I wanted to observe how your roles played out towards challenging the traditional teacher-student hierarchical relations – the “teacher-student contradiction” as Freire (1970, p. 53) called it.

Greg: As instructor for the course, I first approached this project as a self-study of my attempt to carry out a dialogic and humanizing pedagogy. My challenge was maintaining a balance between allowing space for student voice and personal experiences while upholding my responsibilities as a teacher, namely keeping a focus on what Freire and Macedo (1996) called our “epistemological curiosity”.

Erika: Even before I stepped into the classroom that first day I met with you and the class, I had great expectations about what I would be observing; still, I was pleasantly surprised when I heard you tell the students that “everything is pliable, negotiable” as you went over the syllabus and scheduled assignments. Freire (1970) wrote that resolving the teacher–student contradiction is a complex and difficult process that requires that the teacher “exchange the role of depositor, prescriber, domesticator, for the role of student among students” (p. 56). Your democratic words started setting a sound foundation that encouraged active student participation and established a personal, laid-back and friendly atmosphere, where everyone was able to make eye contact from the U-shaped arrangement of the tables. More importantly, your actions backed up your talk. For instance, from the start you made a point of calling all students by name. You suggested a voluntary “share-and-tell” time at the beginning of each class to allow students the space to share something about themselves, an object, poem or piece of music that was meaningful to them. You had them work in pairs or groups prior to their participation in class on assigned topics. You even asked for their permission for me to observe the class! Christie described the learning environment and your role as authoritative (rather than authoritarian) educator this way:

This class was informally formal. [Greg] still had the authority from minute one, but I felt as though it was more of an informal learning process than “I’m your professor, and I’m going to profess to you”. I think his first words were his vision for this class about how we can build this community, how we can learn through one another, and how each week the discussion leaders won’t be him, it will be our peers. And I think that in turn is what kind of set up this community.

Greg: Yes, my goal in all teaching situations is to present myself as a learner within the community in hopes of opening up spaces where all participants feel they contribute to each other’s learning as well as to the development of the community as a whole. From our first meeting, I set out to create an environment that encouraged dialogue, negotiation and community as we examined the ways language and culture intersect with teaching and learning for linguistically and culturally diverse students in public schools. Hoping to establish a democratic foundation for the semester, I invited the class to participate in directing the content and process of our learning, indicating that I welcomed suggestions and changes to our syllabus and weekly agendas. I quickly recognized the power of the traditional teacher–student hierarchy, as the students were not ready to take me at my word that everything was “pliable, negotiable”. My invitations persisted though, and slowly students began to negotiate small changes, such as asking to reschedule assignments and reorganize our agenda for the day.
Erika: Yes, even though students were hesitant at first to take you up on your offer to negotiate and co-construct, your efforts made a difference. Students recognized that not only was there space for their voices and experiences, but their voices were listened to, their experiences valued and validated. I attribute this in large part to your humanizing pedagogy, specifically the time you allowed for students to learn more about one another. You as teacher were “a central driving force in creating a participatory community” (Auerbach, 2000, p. 144). Creating an opportunity at the beginning of each class for students to share a poem, piece of music or personal anecdote is an excellent example of your humanizing pedagogy. This, combined with writing and sharing “I am” poems, contributed to students feeling more comfortable and responsible to the group. Some began crossing personal borders to contribute to the class’ experience as a whole. Michael, one of the quietest and shiest of our group, was the first student to share his “I am” poem:

I am the creek in the backyard where my friends and I played  
I am the climbing tree in my grandparent’s backyard  
I am chopped steak with mashed potatoes and gravy  
I am my papa’s never ending supply of delicious Christmas cookies  
I am my father, a strong, intelligent, and loving man  
I am my proud Norwegian grandfather who was hardworking and sharp as a tack  
I am from my mother with her warmth, caring, and understanding  
I am me

Greg: Yes, Michael’s poem was significant, as it was the first act of deep, personal sharing in the course. Not only was Michael shy by nature and one of only two males in the group, as a non-education major he initially considered himself an outsider in this education course. Later in the semester Michael laughed about this, indicating that he “never would have expected to share a poem in any class, let alone be the first to do so”.

Erika: To me, Michael’s move demonstrated a willingness to be vulnerable in front of his peers. The fact that his poem presents strong emotions of love and care in a socio-cultural context that suggests such standpoints are feminine and “unmanly” speaks to the level of trust and the strength of the relationships being built in the learning community.

“Am I learning in this class?”

Greg: Yes, I agree. However, while I continually attempted to convey that I valued the students’ voices and I trusted their abilities to lead the class, at times they seemed frustrated by how differently the class was structured and conducted, as it did not fit the typical model they had experienced. In our third meeting, Christie was in charge of leading a discussion on the topic “Learning and social context”, and she chose to read to the class from a children’s storybook titled *The rainbow fish*. In the story, a little fish generously gives away all but one of his fancy colourful scales to other fish. The class responded by suggesting that sharing, willingly giving up resources, possessions, and even positions of privilege and power, contributes to multiculturalism and social justice. “By sharing, everyone benefits,” said Jill, who subsequently posed an unexpected question regarding my sharing of power in the course: “Is that why you do things the way you do, [because] I’ve been wondering what and if I’m really learning in this class.” Jill’s question initially put me on
the defensive because as a teacher, I am always assessing my practice in terms of student learning (Nieto, 1999). More directly, it tapped into my concerns about the challenges of teaching dialogically. Was Jill’s question evidence that we had overemphasized personal experience and neglected our core content concerns?

Erika: I clearly remember Jill’s candid question, and how at the time I thought, “Jill feels this learning community is a safe environment where she is free to speak up. Nice!” I also recall what came next, how you “ping-ponged” the question back to the class, and how that in turn triggered a fantastic discussion on learning, knowledge, and power, both in US education systems generally, and specifically in our class as well. Some student contributions that circulated suggested that education in America overemphasizes memorization, measurement and assessment, and is completely grounded in a Western-based, prestigious canon. Others offered that current educational policies like “No Child Left Behind” reinforce standardization of curriculum and fail to promote critical thinking, especially among linguistically and culturally diverse students. These responses suggest that students were learning and making connections between personal experiences and course concepts. Later, in a continuation of this discussion on the course blog, Jill herself commented that indeed she was learning, only that the approach was quite different in that “in this class we’re treated like adults; learning is in our hands.”

Greg: Jill’s question about learning, which emerged from a moment of individual critical reflection, marked a key moment for our classroom community. If she had chosen not to voice her concern, if it had remained strictly at the individual level, the class would have missed the opportunity to reflect on the nature of learning in our community. By bringing her concern to the class, Jill directly questioned my role as the teacher, as the one responsible for her learning according to traditional teacher/student roles to which she was accustomed to. In doing so, she not only initiated a discussion about the nature of knowledge, also just as significantly she laid the foundation for critical and dissident voices within our classroom community.

From learning to problem posing: “I’m expected to. . . I’m not expected to. . .”

Erika: I think one thing the students clearly learned in the course was how to problem pose and to question commonsense presentations of reality. By problem posing together, they began to realize that they were not only in the world, but with the world (Freire, 1970). So as our community developed, students were not simply absorbing or learning about teaching linguistically and culturally diverse students, they began to critically assess their own and broader social constructions of these students’ ethnicities and the implications of those constructions for them as aspiring educators.

Greg: That’s right. For example, some of the most powerful learning occurred as students problem posed common stereotypes of Latinos, African Americans, Asians and Whites during a class session on racism, prejudice and cultural biases. Two discussion leaders led the class in brainstorming as many stereotypes as we could for these different groups. After generating this list, the discussion leaders randomly grouped students into one of the four ethnic categories and asked them to attempt to adopt that group’s perspective as they responded to five prompts: “I’m expected to. . .”; “I’m not expected to. . .”; “I struggle with. . .”; “At 35, I see myself. . .”; and “We are alike because. . .”. To my surprise, the discussion leaders specifically assigned the only two ethnic minority students, Melissa, a Vietnamese American,
and Jackie, an African-American, to participate in their own ethnic groups, asking them to represent and speak for their respective minority groups. As I was not leading the discussion, I resisted my initial reaction to intervene.

Erika: I’m glad you did so, because when it was time for the “Asian” group to share, Melissa offered several responses that reflected her complex and evolving identity as an Asian-American that challenged these stereotypes and the “model minority” myth (Lee, 1994). She also engaged her “majority” classmates in dialogue about how it felt to hear how they saw her and other Asians. Among the things she identified as being “expected to do” she listed “be smart at math and/or science [which she admittedly struggled in], achieve in school, speak funny, study 24/7, and play the piano or violin”. She was unexpected to “speak up and speak out, fail in life, be a powerful, successful Asian-American woman in America”. Her responses to the “I struggle with” and “We are alike because” prompts revealed frustrations with these dominant commonsense perspectives. She struggled with “closed-minded perceptions that all Asians are Chinese, living with two identities, and the mindset NOT to fail because of my people’s struggles for freedom and equality”.

Greg: Throughout the semester, Melissa continued to refer to this class session as a pivotal moment that led to a transformation in her thinking about cross-cultural relations. It created space for her to enter into dialogue with those that were ethnically and culturally different from her, something she had never experienced on a substantive level. Further it allowed her to hear members from the dominant group actually voice their perceptions of Asian-Americans and for her to respond in turn from her lived perspective as an Asian-American. In her final reflection that was written to and shared with the whole class, she commented:

I was able to hear your voices and perceptions about my background. . .we were all able to prove each other wrong and second guess our own identity. I have come to appreciate the many viewpoints that you have offered and to respect and build upon my own thinking along with you. I know that before this class, the only real, constructive viewpoints that I really considered and grew personally and professionally from . . .were of my own “people”. Your voices challenged me to look outside myself and outside my experiences into yours. I think being a minority and not ever really hearing my majorities (Caucasians, African-Americans, Hispanics . . .etc.) speak into depth about their feelings and attitudes towards the world really made me appreciate and consider everyone’s viewpoints. I want to thank you for allowing me to grow intellectually with your culture and expand on my own. Your voices, opinions, and viewpoints have made me alter my way of thinking and feeling towards different cultures, and towards my own.

“This class took the dialogue and abused it”

Greg: However, while Melissa and the others consistently shared about how they were learning to question common sense beliefs, I also think some significant tensions went unaddressed in our class. I want to get back to Jill’s candid question about if and what she was really learning in the class. Jill’s comment really tapped into my concerns about how successful I was at navigating the complex terrain of teaching dialogically and sharing power with the students while still upholding my responsibility to teach. My heightened attention to promoting a democratic and dialogic environment led to significant oversights on my part at times. I mistakenly assumed that if I occupied the traditional “teacher” role too much, standing in front of the room and writing notes on the board for example, I was jeopardizing our dialogic efforts. In hindsight, in these moments I neglected my responsibilities and central
role as a teacher. In their evaluations, two students remarked that they wished “more information had been presented by the professor”.

Erika: What you are saying reminds me of Freire and Macedo’s (1996) warning against teachers renouncing the task of teaching by claiming to become facilitators. It is indeed a huge challenge to strike a balance here: to dialogue and teach. Facing this challenge requires recognizing that the need for dialogue does not rule out the need to teach, at times even employing traditional methods, such as lecture-type classes (Freire, 1998a). Because you missed that perspective to some extent, I think there were times you also missed the opportunity to problem pose and facilitate the class in coming up with summary statements of our thinking for the day. That in turn affected the way a few students, like Jill and Amy, perceived the spirit of the dialogical approach:

I think some people in the class know they can get away with not doing work because we are just going to have a discussion that teeters off into never-never land. This class took the dialogue and abused it, because they knew they could get away with getting off track. It always started with the readings, there was a basis, but then at the end what have we accomplished? We’ve sat there and talked for hours, yeah, but about what? (Amy)

Greg: Amy was a hard-working and conscientious student, and I appreciated the fresh perspective she brought as a non-education major to class discussions each week. I think Amy made it clear to both of us that, from her perspective, some members of the class did not make the same investment in our learning community and were taking it for granted. Amy’s concerns mirrored my own in that I was never fully convinced of how successful I was at balancing teaching and facilitating. Amy’s concerns and my own sense that some students were not doing the readings encouraged me to become more attentive to the quality and level of participation in our discussions. As student stories lingered on and became more tangential at times, I could hear echoes of Freire and Macedo’s (and Amy’s) warnings of holding “group therapy sessions”, and I intervened and worked to bring our discussions back on track. I also began to ask students for a “ticket out” and other written reactions to our readings more frequently. Students read these written reflections and learning summaries out loud or handed them to me at the end of class, literally their ticket to leave the classroom.

Erika: While I too on several occasions missed our class sessions not having bulleted summary statements of our thinking for the day, I don’t recall ever having the sense our discussions got off track. What did strike me again and again was your ability to collect all the students’ voices, make something out of them by connecting them to the topic at hand, and somehow offer that back to the students in a purposeful way to them. Not many teachers can do that – I know I struggle with drawing connections or conclusions on the spur of the moment!

Greg: I suppose I looked to Bartolomé (1996) for insight here. She asserted that not only is it possible to incorporate student voices and experiences into the classroom without neglecting our responsibility to teach, but that this process of connecting to students’ lives not only contributes to individual learning, but facilitates the complex process of developing an engaged learning community, where student and teacher roles are tossed end over end and inform one another as we “mutually participate in the intellectually exciting undertaking we call learning” (p. 240). Reading Amy’s comments about our discussions going off into “never-never land”
and students “abusing the dialogue” alongside other students’ comments confirms the complex nature of classroom communities, lending further evidence for the need for dialogic practices:

Everything we talk about is in reference to our own experience which ties back to our education discussions. I love being able to have a voice and to hear others as well. I can only hope to establish such an environment in my own classroom. (Anonymous student)

I think Greg had a great balance because he was always there kind of directing and keeping us on task, and providing the actual book knowledge and experience that we don’t have. But it was still our ideas, and I think that was awesome because we could relate it to our culture of twenty-something year olds. (Christie)

So while these quotes and Amy’s comments appear to contradict each other, it is critical to recognize that they represent how each student actually experienced the class. *I guess this is where I “missed the boat”,* missed the opportunity to discuss and dialogue about these competing views as a class – as parts of the whole of our classroom community.

Erika: YES! This is where I was hoping our dialogue would bring us. This is where I would have acted differently than you as a teacher. It may be the verbal, outspoken Brazilian culture I come from, where misunderstandings and conflicts are more often than not confronted out in the open, but I feel we failed to completely “name the world” – the dissonant elephant(s) in the room – of our classroom community. I for one would have had a round table with the students to discuss the feedback they gave in the mid-term evaluations. Also, we never dialogically addressed the tensions Amy and others revealed, so we missed the opportunity to grow as a group by working in and through our differences. To some extent, your dialogical intentions remained “in your head” and you engaged in sorting them out and responding to them on your own, monologically.

Greg: Yes, for example, in responding to Amy’s concerns about student accountability, I made changes in my practice, but I neglected to include any other voices in that process. More importantly perhaps, I failed to bring the issue in front of the class. I have learned that in order to reach our greatest dialogical potential, we cannot be selective in our dialogical efforts. Dialogue applies both to our relationship to the object of inquiry and to the process of learning and growing together as a community of learners. On one level, we made room for competing and dissonant voices during discussions of course concepts. We dialogue vigorously and respectfully about difficult issues including bilingualism, immigration, racism and privilege and how those issues intersected and collided with our personal, religious and political selves at times. However, on another level, I failed to fully engage the underlying structural tensions within our learning community. As a result, disparate perceptions of how the class community was developing were left unaddressed and our collective potential was limited.

Erika: Exactly. I see in Freire (1998a) an obsession to explore the potential of dissonance that has become my obsession too. As Freire (1998a) offered his own “reading of the world” (p. 112), he consistently sought to encourage other “readings of the world”, different from the one he as an educator offered, and at times antagonistic to it. Dissonant dialogues make promising means for engaging in a rigorous search for knowledge(s) while working across differences in an environment of tolerance and respect. But to be really fair to you, Greg, as I look back to our experience with
this class, what stands out to me bottom-line is the image of students who learned (and learned a lot!) and a teacher who cared. hooks (1994) wrote that “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p. 13). While your attention to process may have missed the mark, your efforts to foster care and learning paid off, and dialogue played an indispensable role here.

“I do feel that our learning community rocks!”

Greg: Yes, I believe the students’ feedback validated my efforts to enact a caring and humanizing pedagogy:

Greg was a supporter. I know that he’s paying attention for one; for two, he really does care about what he’s doing; and three, he really is interested in his students. And I think that’s the three main things teachers should have. (Melissa)

I felt like I had more of a relationship with Greg than I did with any other teacher that I’ve had. He knew who we were, he knew stuff about us that we had shared, and he shared stuff with us, so we knew him. You want to live up to the expectations [of a teacher like that]. (Mike)

Erika: I am sure we could go on and on describing what was, for the most part, a successful participatory learning community, and enumerating the myriad of student dialogic voices we heard. Lidia’s words evoke the best in our experience; her heartfelt phrase, “I do feel that our learning community rocks!”, describe what motivated her for this class. And to me, Sheila “nailed it”, so I will not attempt to do any better. Sheila shared her own take on what we “could be”, what we became in her eyes, in a very telling and sweet piece that deeply inspires me as a teacher-learner:

Sheila’s Recipe for a Classroom Just Like Ours (or Chocolate Chip Cookies)
2 cups of great content and enlightening discussion (flour)
1 cup of firmly packed chairs in a square of tables (brown sugar)
1 cup of meaningful assignments (sugar)
2 adults in the room to offer their life experience and expertise in education (2 eggs)
1 teaspoon of collaborative learning (vanilla)
1 teaspoon of laughter (baking soda)
1 teaspoon of individual sharing at the beginning of each class (salt)
2 cups of a diverse and fun group of students (chocolate chips)

Greg: For me, the process you and I followed in discussing, analysing, writing up and representing this experience substantially informed how I have come to understand what actually happened in our experience together. As a result of our efforts, my positions have been tested and my thinking extended. This speaks directly to the role of dialogue in learning and making sense of human experience, as well as building meaningful relations with others. Much more than a collaborative effort, ours was truly dialogical. It has indeed been a pleasure and I look forward to continuing the dialogue in the future.

As it happened, our dialogue did continue and deepen as Erika engaged in a more thorough investigation of Greg’s dialogic pedagogy in her dissertation work. Erika’s dissertation, entitled ‘From “I am” to “we could be:’ Teaching, learning and doing research dialogically’ is scheduled to be defended in April 2011.
Implications

In closing we transition from our dialogue to present a shared perspective regarding the implications of our findings. We acknowledge that doing so may appear incongruent with our dialogical framework, but we urge readers to rethink such a position. Our intent here is not to present a seamless or undisputed understanding of the study and its implications. Rather, it is to demonstrate how our understandings of our work have been informed and shaped through dialogue with one another.

Our study found that the critical and humanizing pedagogical approach practised by Greg challenged the traditional teacher–student hierarchical structure. Through participation in class, course work and course evaluations, students reported a sense of collective responsibility for each other’s learning throughout the course, positioning their peers as important knowledge-producers that contributed to their learning. They acknowledged that making room for individual experiences within the academic setting and connecting those experiences to course content contributed to the development of caring personal relationships and ultimately an engaged learning community unlike that typically experienced in their undergraduate course work. In contrast to these findings, however, the data also suggested a more complex learning community, one that struggled to name and examine some of its underlying tensions.

Stepping back from our own classroom experience we see implications for dialogic work in ESOL teacher education. We recognize schools (from K–12 to doctoral studies) as one of society’s most pervasive and influential cultural institutions and suggest that they are uniquely positioned to inspire and empower participants towards more critical and thoughtful participation in society. Given recent demographic trends and the resulting linguistic and cultural diversity of today’s classrooms, attainment of such a vision has never been more urgent in the United States. In this context, ESOL teacher education programmes have the unique opportunity to model progressive and humanizing pedagogies that value diverse students’ culture, knowledge and life experience. Based on our work employing such a stance with pre-service ESOL teachers, we make several recommendations for teachers and teacher educators.

First, as evidenced by our struggles to engage conflict and dissonance, we who choose to teach from critical and humanizing perspectives cannot do so selectively. We must recognize dialogue as a process of knowing and learning as it relates to both the content and the process of our work. As TESOL continues to attract bilingual and bicultural individuals to the profession, for example, we must make space for divergent cultural perspectives and life experiences in the classroom and be prepared to engage the tension and conflicts that arise. And to engage them as a community, dialogically. The successes we may experience in fostering rich, critical discussions remain isolated and fractured unless we also attend to the structural and procedural elements of our work. When we do attend to these elements, we increase our potential for building caring learning communities and generating the collective awareness and action required to confront prevailing deficit perspectives regarding cultural and linguistic diversity.

Secondly, we must recognize that our work with future teachers is always embedded in broader socio-cultural and political contexts as well as the local specific institutional constraints that have real and lasting implications on our dialogic work. For example, while nearly all students indicated their experience in the course was overwhelmingly positive, indeed transformative for some, the experience was continuously compared to and mediated by normative educational expectations. That is, at times students eschewed negotiation and dialogue in favour of a more hierarchical relationship that involved direct instruction.
from teacher to students and prescriptive assignments, as these practices more closely align with the ways students typically experience schooling. Other scholars have written of the “inertia” of traditional didactic pedagogies (Chow, Fleck, Fan, Joseph, & Lyter, 2003) and how this force from non-dialogic classrooms can “spill over” into dialogic ones (Shor, 1992, p. 93). As critical teacher educators, it is our task to continue our work for broader social change in ways that invite students into the dialogue, being mindful of the inertia created by banking approaches to education and the initial resistance to critical approaches they can provoke.

As the title of this paper suggests, our work as critical and dialogic educators and learners is never finished; we are constantly striving towards more equitable and democratic learning environments, towards what we can become. This study reaffirmed our belief that teaching and learning from a critical and humanizing perspective must be regarded as a constituent component of our process of becoming more fully human, “our ontological vocation” as Freire puts it (1970, p. 55). Furthermore, to move from individual to collective awareness and action, we must be willing to name our worlds, including the tensions and conflict we encounter in our classrooms, if we are to understand and grow from them.

Finally, while we recognize the shortcomings and limitations of our work, we also submit the need to celebrate our successes. We made significant strides in confronting the teacher-student hierarchy and building a caring dialogic learning community. We explored teaching for cultural and linguistic diversity in creative and critical ways and built caring and meaningful relationships in the process. While Sheila’s “recipe” for a classroom community provides a good starting point, we offer no formula for building dialogic learning communities; the socio-cultural, political, and historical nuances of each context must be considered. Freire himself warned against formulaic enterprises; rather, he proposed that his ideas be recreated and reinvented within specific contexts (Macedo & Freire, 2005). We do suggest, however, that this study extends our understanding of how through dialogue, participants in education, all teacher-students, may transcend traditional hierarchical relationships in favour of more caring humanizing ones.

Notes
1. The Campo Minutemen are a group of self-appointed citizens who have taken it upon themselves to monitor the USA–Mexico border in hopes of curbing illegal immigration.
2. We use the term advocacy stance here to reflect our understanding that fundamental social change requires that teachers and other cultural workers go beyond passive levels of tolerance and understanding, and begin to take action in their practice.
3. “I am” poems are personal poems with each line often starting with the phrase “I am” or “I am from.” The goal is for the author to describe in their own words who they are and what’s salient to their cultural identity. See http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/activities/poetry.html for information and lesson plans.
4. Over the years Freire’s work has been critiqued from a number of perspectives. Like Bowers (2005), Ellsworth (1989), Rasmussen (2005), and Robinson (2005) all asserted that Freire’s pedagogy stems from Enlightenment thinking and promotes individualism. Others have critiqued Freire’s work for not valuing indigenous knowledge (Siddhartha, 2005) and being anthropocentric and inattentive to environmental concerns (Bowers & Apfiel-Marglin, 2005). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to address these concerns, we feel it is important to acknowledge these critiques. For further discussion, see Au (2009), Au and Apple (2007), and Freire and Macedo (1996).
5. Bate-papo (chewing the rag, chewing the fat) is a Brazilian colloquialism denoting a noncommittal, amiable conversation.
6. A “ticket out” is a summarizing strategy usually used at the end of class. Students are asked to respond in writing to a particular question or to pose a question or comment related to the class discussion or readings for the day. These written responses, or tickets, are handed to the teacher as students leave the classroom.
References


