Book Walk: Works That Move Our Teaching Forward

"Speaking" the Walk, "Speaking" the Talk: Embodying Critical Pedagogy to Teach Young Adult Literature

sj Miller

When we initiated "Book Walk" in the October 2005 issue of English Education, *we envisioned a feature that would allow educators to consider the ways that they transact with texts within local and broader communities of readers. We wrote, "In this column, we invite English educators to initiate sustained reflections on a variety of texts that somehow work together to extend and deepen our practices as well as the ways that we support the teachers with whom we work" (p. 56). Interestingly, the following piece by sj Miller extends such a dialogue not only across texts but also across articles. Her piece is a response to and continuation of the considerations that we presented in the selection we wrote for the January 2007 issue—an explanation of how we used sj Miller's article in the May 2005 issue of* English Journal *as an anchor piece for our own efforts to help our pre-service teachers grow in their understanding of long-range planning within a particular context.*

—Diane Zigo and Regina Dunlavey Derrico

As I was leafing through a recent issue of *English Education*, I came across an article written by two educators, Diane Zigo and Regina Dunlavey Derrico (2007), who utilized my article, *Shattering images of violence in young adult literature: Strategies for the classroom*, as a touchstone piece in their graduate level combined methods and instructional strategies course to introduce students to instructional scaffolding. Their students attempted to recreate my long-range lesson plans, and to consider what my students had experienced, to reinvent my pedagogy, to reconstruct the formative and summative assessments, to speculate on ancillary heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1986) and other texts read, to assemble the kind of teacher I was, and to critique and fill in

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gaps in my lesson plans about the unit on Gail Giles's young adult novel, *Shattering Glass*, in a high school senior literature course. When I finished reading their article, I was inspired by their research to critically examine my own pedagogy and reflect on how my English education students, in a mid-size, rurally situated university, in a young adult (YA) literature methods course interpreted theoretical lenses and pedagogies and enacted teaching by using one particular text and several shorter articles during a course in the spring of 2007.

A critical reflection of the efficacy of my teaching and the pedagogies I embody is potentially important because under the continual threat of *No Child Left Behind* and some research that may devalue qualitative research, I want to support my students in their efforts, while offering them a well-rounded understanding of different pedagogies and possible applications. By evaluating my own teaching with them, I develop a more equitable understanding of what they may face in their schools in Western, Pennsylvania. My teaching then can better support my students to both embody and negotiate their own pedagogy, whether toward or against my own.

Speaking the Walk

The YA methods class I taught included graduate and undergraduate students who were currently or would be teaching in English language arts or special education classes at the elementary or secondary level or who needed the course as part of their coursework for initial licensure. The class comprised nineteen students, two of whom were male. Of the nineteen, five women were employed as full-time classroom teachers (one taught high school, three taught middle school, and one taught special education), three women were substituting, three women and one male were student teaching, and the other eight students were completing their coursework prior to student teaching.

I selected Laurie Halse Anderson's YA text *Speak,* a favorite text of my students and colleagues, and a text that many English educators are inclined to use or encourage their students to read. The book can be highly engaging and witty, rich in detail, and an excellent bridge between YA literature and canonical texts with similar themes (e.g., Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings)*. The texts lend themselves nicely to making predictions and deals with teen issues that many beginning teachers deal with in their schools. Through a sarcastic, first person narration, the story chronicles Melinda, a sullen, quiet, and caustic 9th grader as she traverses high school after experiencing a life-al-

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tering rape the summer prior and details how she confronts her attacker. In self-selected groups, students chronologically taught the class each week, guided by a rubric pertaining to a section in *Speak*.

Each successive week, groups would build upon what was once taught the week before, through class assessment and critiques. These teaching groups were also asked to develop social action projects (projects that led to some type of social change) that they would later trade with each other and enact before the semester was over. The culmination of the course was a critique of the rubric that I handed out and a revision for age/grade level and effectiveness. The final measurement of efficacy was to ask these current and future preservice and inservice teachers how they implemented pedagogy into their own classrooms.

Readings for "*Speaking*"

I introduced students to the theories and lenses instrumental in shaping my pedagogy: transformative and liberatory (Freire, 1970), which suggests that teaching can help people act on and transform the world around them; the theory of social constructivism, derived from Vygotsky's sociocultural theories of literacy in which, as Bruner (1996) explains, the learner uses "the cultural tools, the symbols, texts and ways of thinking in an active process of meaning making and reality construction" (p. 20) to interpret the world; and critical literacy, which according to Lewinson, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002), is to read by "disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple view points, focusing on sociopolitical issues and taking action and promoting social justice" (p. 3). We discussed four dominant pedagogical and theoretical approaches to teaching: constructivism, sociocultural theory, transactional theory, and critical literacy. In order to understand social constructivism, we read for breadth and depth by first reading Chapter 3 of Dornan, Rosen and Wilson's (1997) text, *The Reading Process: Who's in Charge?* for a conceptual framework of different theoretical approaches to reading to help make informed choices about pedagogical approaches to teaching texts. This chapter, introduces different models of reading such as behaviorist, psycholinguistic, and social construction. We also furthered our understanding of constructivism by reading excerpts from Perez's (1998) *Sociocultural Contexts of Language and Literacy*. To understand transactional theory and reader-response, we read Rosenblatt's (1994) *The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing,* and to develop perspectives about critical literacy, we read Lewinson et al.'s (2002) *Taking on Critical Literacy: The Journey of Newcomers and Novices*. Over the course of the semester,

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pedagogies shifted as the students read, talked, co-taught, offered critiques, and embodied and revised their thinking (Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003).

Speaking the Talk

Presenter: Me, pp. 3–29

I modeled teaching so as to familiarize students with the rubric, an attempt to alleviate fears about co-teaching as early as the fourth class meeting of the semester. Prior to class that evening, students were asked to read pp. 3-29 of *Speak* and to highlight and create marginalia within the text itself, consider how to tie passages into larger sociopolitical issues and teaching strategies discussed in class, consider how to design an essay around questions derived from the highlighted passages in the book, and consider categories a teacher might want students to create (for more detail see Miller & Norris, 2007, Chapter 7). Students paired in teams of two and assigned each group 2-3 pages from which they were to identify a passage they liked, and then catalogue a list of themes, symbolisms, and stylistic choices.

Barbara, Koren, and Jasmine, pp. 57–80

For the first lesson, students read Rosenblatt and Lewinson's articles along with an assigned section of *Speak*. Two of the students had full-time teaching experience while the third was working on a masters in teaching English. The students divided their peers into small groups using colored taffy, asking each group to then choose a bag with undisclosed contents (a tree, charcoal, turkey bones, the head of a Barbie doll, and an apple), and answer questions about the contents (with a self-selected reporter and recorder). Students identified the symbolism of their object, matched the object with a section from the reading and explored its implications in the section, and then listed and analyzed the themes and stylistic techniques they saw in the section. As students worked, the teachers circulated and offered assistance. At the completion of the activity, each group shared its findings while one of the teachers typed the answers for the class on the doc cam.

During our class "commendation and recommendation" time, peers offered feedback. Some students chimed in that they enjoyed the brown bag surprise, the paper handout, the doc cam summary, and the small group work. Other students commented that they felt the teaching could have been strengthened with cross-dialogue and more direct instruction on what kinds of stylistic techniques they should have looked for, and felt the sharing at

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the end should have been done based on the consecutive sections read. This particular group of students seemed to make more sophisticated moves in their teaching as compared to a prior group, although it may have been attributable to the fact that two of the three were full-time classroom teachers. Nonetheless, student engagement and, buy-in seemed higher with all students on-task. Many students seemed to be developing their analytical skills more as I observed them use at least four additional novel stylistic techniques (alliteration, flashback, multiple tones, onomatopoeia) than were used in the prior teaching. They also applied previously discussed concepts of theme, which reflected a deeper comprehension of the text. I pondered what had influenced this change: Rosenblatt, Lewinson et. al., comfort level, or prior modeling?

After these students finished the critique, we moved into cross-dialogue and began our discussion about how Rosenblatt and Lewinson, et al. had influenced reconceptualization of the teaching. I asked, "Tell me how you saw Rosenblatt and Lewinson activated in the class teaching." All of these students stared blankly at me. I then asked for a volunteer to summarize critical literacy and reader-response. Koren, who taught that day, said that Rosenblatt influenced her to help her peers have an aesthetic experience through the "grab bag" approach so that they would remember the feelings that were evoked when they touched, for instance, the Barbie doll's head, and then reflected on it. The "Barbie head" group concurred that the act left an imprint. Jasmine said that the group's unconventional approach to teaching was influenced and mirrored in the "disrupting [of] the commonplace" and "multiple viewpoints" as articulated in critical literacy theory. She also said that the article inspired her to action. I thought, "Okay, this is a decent start". I next asked them to read Perez's *Sociocultural Contexts of Language and Literacy,* along with their assigned reading for *Speak* for the next class.

Miquela, Keisha, and Katrina, pp. 81–107

> "As a teacher, I know how difficult it can be at times to get discussion going. I am so glad you introduced us to constructivism and theory of transaction. I wish these theories were practiced more in the classroom."
>
> —Heather

That day's lesson left me "speakless" because it sparked a new dimensionality of praxis amongst the class. That lesson was about putting students into a situation similar to Melinda, who felt unable to communicate her

feelings about the rape. Each group had a different ability taken away and were assigned 2-3 different sections of the reading whereby they had to communicate in whatever way they could to their able-bodied note taker the themes, symbols, stylistic techniques or mood on a large chart sectioned into quarters. When a group lacked a context to communicate, an individual could draw upon his/her own sociocultural background and experience and share a skill. Although each group designated one able-bodied person as the writer, each group either had their sight suspended (with blindfolds), hands bound (with rope), was speechless (self-monitored) or was hearing impaired (inserted ear plugs).

Several students noted after the lesson that they appreciated the creativity of their peers to communicate their thoughts to the note taker. The group with their hands bound communicated by either pointing at or moving materials with their chins, by speaking. The group with the earplugs communicated by pointing to passages, moaning, or speaking. The group who could not speak communicated through nodding, pounding their fists, making a thumbs up, writing, or pointing. Lastly, the group that could not see communicated by speaking, questioning, listening, leaning, and asking for reassurance from their able-bodied note taker.

Some students noted that the lesson seemed constructivist-based, and those who had a background in sociocultural theory noted its applications in the day's teaching. I asked the presenters if reading Perez had influenced their teaching. Miquela commented that the passage had motivated her to put the class in groups, wherein one skill was suspended for the activity, making individuals dependent on individual contexts from which to draw upon to make meaning of the text.

Students also commented that they observed each other draw from their own experiences in order to convey meaning in their groups, and based on sociocultural backgrounds, were able to build some form of communication with one another. Many felt a sense of helplessness and anxiety when they were forced to use a skill to communicate meaning that they had not fully considered as meaning. The able-bodied people expressed feeling pressured to convey accurately the ideas of the members of the group because many were uncertain that they were being understood. Keisha concluded, "We chose this presentation format because we wanted to be able to demonstrate how losing a sense does not only affect the way that the world is seen through you, but how you react to it." Class ended with students reading Dornan et al.'s (1997) *The Reading Process: Who's in Charge?*

Jordana, Gina, and Tamara, pp. 108–142

The section for the next day's class involved Melinda's rape experience. Prior to today's class, I spoke earlier with the group who was going to be teaching and encouraged them to invite in an expert who could speak to the class about the rape. I wanted to offer the students a way that they could be proactive in their own teaching around controversial topics and utilize experts in the field.

Class began with a guest speaker from the Center for Student Life on campus who discussed the social stigma of rape. On our campus alone within the previous two years, there had been seven cases of forcible sex offenses reported to university police and eighty-seven percent of students indicated that it was a campus concern. I mentioned to the class in the possibility of bringing in a counselor or an individual from a rape crisis center to counter emotionally loaded reading passages when they were teaching at the secondary level to discuss issues around date rape, unwanted advances, and fear of reporting, which might help students be proactive with their peers or even come to terms with something that may have happened in their past. If they did not feel emotionally prepared to teach a text that involved rape or sexual assault, they should stay away from it because such powerful issues open up both students as well as teachers to issues that lend themselves to heightened involvement. Secondary teachers should inform parents and secure written consent prior to teaching a text about sexual violence and inform the school counselor about any texts involving sexual assault, should a student come forward and need support.

After the speaker left, the teachers moved the class into groups wherein they were to compare a pre-designated section of the reading to the rape scene, "A Night to Remember," by applying mood, stylistic techniques, theme, and symbols onto a tree—a dominant symbol that was inferred to represent Melinda throughout the text. After groups finished their tasks, they reported on the links they found between the chapters and the significance of how the techniques enhanced their understanding of Melinda's anguish.

During our recommendation and commendation session, many students noted that they had appreciated a visual activity so that they could express how they felt without speaking because after the speaker left, many students were quite emotional and appreciated that they could be with peers and benefit from the community that they had fostered. Other students were critical of the speaker who they felt was not well prepared because she did not reference the text. Their feedback segued into a discussion of Dornan et al.'s (1997) work. The students who taught understood that "context mat-

ters" and that it was especially important for them to set up a class in a way that the context in the book was included in their teaching for that day. They also noted that they built on a psycholinguistic model, where knowledge is derived from reader's background knowledge, perceptions, questions, inferences, and a sociolinguistic model, whereby readers access language through race, class and culture.

David, Marie, and Barb, pp. 186–end

For the final student teaching in small groups, students answered a variety of questions about theme and stylistic techniques by writing on a pre-cut tree leaf. As groups finished their answers, they placed their leaves on a tree trunk that was taped to the chalkboard. The tree grew from a trunk into a beautiful collective artistic creation. At the conclusion of the activity, the teachers asked questions that required inference and prediction about Melinda's future as a sophomore returning to the same school the next fall. David asked how Melinda feels about herself, how peers would respond to her, and how her family would now treat her. Many students thought she would be more open, gregarious and popular because she had finally reported the rape and posted information about what the rapist had done on the bathroom stall, " Guys to stay away from" (p. 185) thereby possibly preventing other sexual assaults. Some said that she would have a better relationship with her parents because she had found her voice again. Students disclosed individual stories about friends who had experienced assaults similar to Melinda inferring that the community fostered in class lent itself to such sharing. I said that I thought Melinda was at high risk for a possible relapse unless she had supportive teachers, peers and friends, and most students agreed with me. Students left class that day with a packet of seeds that they were encouraged to plant as a way to remember the cycle of life and Melinda's healing.

What Did We Learn?

Working side-by-side with my students, I discovered we all seem to appreciate the reflective and reflexive nature of the class. I was strengthened and validated in my own praxis as my students shared that they learned better how to encourage students to glean meaning from teaching, and I thought forward about locating my future research in self-study (Loughran, 2007; Zeichner, 2007). In future sections of YA lit, I would apply student feedback so I could continue to shift conditions to optimize learning opportunities. My students struggled with much of the theoretical language from class

readings, especially in Rosenblatt (1994) and Dornan et al. (1997). Some students commented that they felt more confident now that they had created lessons for their peers, and more assured in translating and transacting critical literacy, transactional theory (reader response), sociocultural theory, and social constructivism into practice. Most felt more capable of creating agency and empowering students to become part of the class. Many also noted that though they were initially frustrated about how to employ stylistic techniques throughout the teachings, they had actually come to understand the significance of using them to teach meaning in fun and creative ways—and meet expectations for standardized testing. Because teachers are held accountable to district curriculum and state and national standards that are linked to mandatory testing, teachers are often required to attend to stylistic considerations in curriculum guides or in state testing agendas. Further, the approach that we employed in the course seemed to nurture their creative needs, while also directing them toward how to be consistent with more sophisticated theoretical perspectives. Most important to most of the class was that no one ever said, "This is what the passage means" in a monological way; rather, students were consistently encouraged to discover meaning through highly creative and clever hands-on self developed activities, and discover personal. When asked about modifying the lesson rubric, students didn't offer suggestions, most said they would make adjustments based on their students' needs, age levels and abilities. Such awareness suggests an understanding of the significance of context and knowing students' interests. The current inservice teachers mentioned that applying the strategies they were learning about into their classrooms and felt student engagement was higher than usual.

In closing, Tyla, a shy student, disclosed in a response letter late in the semester that she had been raped and could relate to Melinda.

> I have found myself inside the story. We share very similar experiences and by reading this, I was able to view myself through an outside perspective—again, if that makes any sense? I have evolved and healed, I guess you could say, similar to the way she had. I think it's amazing the way a story can affect you. I find it fascinating how something so simple as a paper with words on it can transform itself into something so powerful and deep; how it can help someone come to closure with a situation, or see something through a different perspective, or even realize something that they never had before.

Comments such as hers remind me why I love teaching and how transformative teaching about reading can be improved by liberatory and critical pedagogy. I am honored to be part of a community of English educators

who for the most part critically reflect on their work and in so doing, develop a desire to bring students along with us, who in turn can embody theory and practice by both speaking and walking the talk in such a way that all of us are transformed.

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