

CARL LRI Paper: Giving Voice to Students as Literacy Practice

Abstract: Libraries have long been considered spaces of silent introspection. Contemporary learning, however, is a social activity where student voices are valued. This presentation explores voice in the library through two case studies where librarians and faculty sought to develop students' voices and create forums for these voices to be heard. **Résumé:**

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1. Theoretical Overview

Libraries have long been considered quiet places, spaces of silence and quiet introspection. The stereotype of the “shushing librarian” holds powerful sway in our collective imagination and memory. Contemporary learning, however, is a social activity, performed in teams and affinity groups. In this new model, we have come to understand “voice” as an important part of the ways students participate in learning, negotiate meanings, and develop new understandings. This presentation explores the idea of voice in the library through two case studies, one American (University of Iowa) and one Canadian (University of Windsor). In both examples, librarians and faculty worked not only to develop students' voices but also to find forums for these voices in a larger context.

Lev Vygotsky argues that all learning begins as conversation. We learn to talk and interact with ideas by first interacting through language with others (Vygotsky, 1986). We find our voices in conversation, and then these voices become the “inner speech” of thinking (Vygotsky, 1986). Mikhail Bakhtin's literary analysis suggests that narratives can be either “monologic” or “polyphonic.” Monologic narratives (like epic poems) are dominated by a standard language and ideology (Bakhtin, 1981). Polyphonic narratives encourage conversation and development of the individual voice. Classrooms and libraries can be either monologic or polyphonic (or dialogic in the case of one-to-one situations), or on some continuum between the two.

In this presentation, panelists will examine two case studies of efforts to develop spaces where students can engage their voices in polyphonic or dialogic ways. As context for the discussion, we want to introduce the concept of “third space.” “Third place” has been proposed and discussed as a new model for libraries. Based on Roy Oldenburg's book *The Great Good Place*, third places are somewhere between home and work, places for congenial gathering in shared social places. Third space differs from third place in important ways. Third spaces are produced when two distinct cultural models come into conversation and negotiate a hybrid-shared space. Born from difference and diversity, third spaces are dynamic, spaces where learning is dialogic and can be highly productive. For third spaces to occur, all parties must recognize and signal openness to dialogism. Above all, third spaces occur when genuine voices are encouraged and respected through

listening and responding. Third spaces are democratic egalitarian spaces (Elmborg, 2011).

2. Case Study One: The “Secrets Wall”

At The University of Iowa, the library has recently undergone a major remodeling to create a Learning Commons. This experiment with space has largely focused on amenities more like third places. A coffee shop, group study rooms, and lots of wide-open computing spaces make this an inviting place for students. During renovation, the Undergraduate Services Librarian began an experiment with a “secrets wall.” Students were invited (with a sign posted in the main thoroughfare near the reference desk) to use a sticky note to “post a secret.” During finals week (a time generally understood to be stressful), the students were given a space to appropriate through the sharing of something they would normally not divulge in public. The secrets wall became a minor sensation. Students posted their anxieties, their dreams. They shared their sexual escapades and their heartbreaks. Many of the secrets were genuinely funny, and small crowds gathered throughout the day to read the secrets and discuss them. This can be understood as an exercise in third space practice and the encouragement of a polyphonic library. Bakhtin introduces the idea of “carnivalizing,” as a way for people to break down monologic structures (Bakhtin, 1984). Humor functions to disarm power and to subvert dominant voices. The secrets wall invited students to share their voices, and in the process, they claimed some ownership of the library and what it means to them.

3. Case Study Two: History on the Web

Until fairly recently, student voices in scholarly or academic discourses were relegated to long-established formats and monologic forms like the term paper or scholarly essay. Papers and essays provided students with opportunities to engage their own voice with other scholarly voices and enter the world of academic discourse and allowed professors a way to evaluate how closely students could emulate those discourses. Almost always, however, term papers were read by only one reader: he or she who graded the paper. In this way, the scholarly conversations students engaged in contained only two non-dialogic voices-- the grader and the graded-- and more often than not, the conversation begun in the paper or essay ceased with the return of a graded paper.

The advent of digital technologies means that we can now offer student voices many more forums for participation in scholarly dialogues. In a course called "History on the Web," at the University of Windsor, a history professor and a librarian team taught a course exploring how technology could offer students new ways of interacting with historical knowledge and historical information. While we investigated how was history conveyed on the web, we were particularly interested in having students find ways in which they themselves could engage in dialogic and polyphonic discussions regarding the writing, preserving, and curating of history. Our main goal was to help students move beyond being passive consumers of historical information and toward finding their voices as active participants within the polyphonic world of historical knowledge.

Creating and building historically themed Twitter feeds, contributing book reviews to sites like GoodReads or Amazon.com, writing, expanding, and revising Wikipedia entries on historical topics, and adding historical photographs to GoogleMaps or HistoryPin were but a few of the ways our students actively engaged with the writing of history on the web. They also created digital history projects that worked to help create conversations about historical events and historical people and about the nature of historical inquiry itself. In these ways, we wanted students to begin to see that academic conversations

could be more than graded monologues shared with only one reader. Academic conversations could be truly polyphonic.

4. Conclusion

This presentation will feature: an introduction to the theoretical themes informing the discussion of the case studies; a discussion of the two case studies and the theories and practices related to those case studies; a closing activity developed to generate conversations and additional questions.

Works Cited

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