We have become aware that each classroom is a community, and that discourse is at its heart. It is discourse that connects people, that enables them to negotiate meaning in a situation or from a text, that enables a teacher to lead a class in new directions. Since discourse always involves more than one person, each brings to the encounter his or her own patterns of discourse, learned in the family and community, and further expanded by every exchange. The teacher, then, makes use of this resource, helping learners to meld and build upon their learned discourse patterns and to develop a fuller command of the language being used in the classroom in preparation for later use in the wider world.

Classroom communities in today's linguistically diverse schools reflect culturally rich societies. For teachers this means learning to make use of a perhaps unexpected abundance—what learners bring to classrooms with their culturally unique knowledge and discourse that teachers can use in effective learning situations.

What helps the teacher most in such a class is an awareness of authentic sociolinguistic diversity, of different forms and uses of language that reflect cultural background. A teacher's positive attitude toward each student's diversity supports the student in further learning. Student success in acquiring and using literacy grows out of culturally authentic talk surrounding literacy events at home and at school.

This article is designed to help teachers develop an awareness of discourse diversity in classroom talk, create authentic literacy lessons based on principles of instruction involving classroom talk, and become acquainted with many useful references for expanding their professional knowledge about sociolinguistic variation and its role in teaching reading. This article first reviews selected...
studies on classroom discourse diversity, then summarizes principles for authentic talk in literacy instruction.

**Discourse variation in cultural contexts**

Oral discourse, which is socially constructed, has important properties: It is functional (speakers use language to accomplish things), meaningfully organized (with patterns of idea networks), and unified (shows cohesion, coherence). Literacy, too, is socially constructed (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Halliday, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978), which is why natural talking is a critical aspect of literacy activities for culturally diverse learners.

Cultural variation in talking can have a strong influence on literacy learning, as Au and Mason (1981) showed when they described how Hawaiian minority children used their own culturally acceptable conversational styles in literacy lessons. The Hawaiian learners improved their reading abilities only when teachers allowed collaborative and conversational discourse in reading lessons—authentic discussions about ideas in texts—rather than the traditional recitation and repetition of important information (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

However, while collaborative, conversational literacy lessons were successful with Hawaiian children, they were not successful with Navajo children learning to read (Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987). Classroom talk that is natural in one sociocultural context may not be natural in other contexts.

Learners use their natural discourse styles in their home talk and in classroom talk. When Michaels (1981) examined the narratives that urban children produced during sharing time in their classroom, she found differences in organization of ideas: African-American children constructed their talk in terms of ideas associated with the topic, but European-American children shared ideas centered more directly on the topic. (Other researchers, such as Hyon and Sulzby, 1991, have reported that African-American children used both narrative frameworks in story retellings.) Oral discourse styles and patterns also transfer to the written texts children and teenagers produce, as Horowitz (in press, b) found in African-, Jewish-, and Hispanic-American communities.

This persistence of discourse style suggests that learners need to construct meaning in their own natural way in transition to acquiring the fullest range of literate discourse that English or any language has to offer. Teachers must recognize differences as manifestations of cultural discourse which can be expanded rather than interrupted or suppressed.

McCollum (1991) found striking differences when she made cross-cultural comparisons of discourse patterns in a third-grade classroom in the United States and one in Puerto Rico. The predominant discourse in the U.S. classroom involved turn taking controlled by the teacher, who called on each student to respond. In the Puerto Rican classroom, the teacher allowed students more opportunities to express themselves in lessons involving “instructional conversations,” consistent with a model of teaching as “assisting literacy performance” (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). The teacher incorporated more collaborative feedback and modeling, language expansion and elaborations of student responses, and more functional questioning—all of which supported learning more effectively than traditional question-recitation routines.

Teachers do need to be aware of the influence of their students’ culture. Robisheaux (1993) described how Hispanic students who have successfully completed a program in English as a Second Language can fail in the regular classroom not because of a language barrier but because their non-Hispanic teachers were not aware of important cultural differences.

Teachers can expand their own sociolinguistic awareness by studying some of the published research on cultural variations of family narratives, question-answer and bedtime story routines, and other language-learning child-rearing practices of urban and rural communities (Heath, 1983; Kochman, 1981; Labov, 1972; Ward, 1971). English-speaking teachers can also benefit from exposure to English discourse variation around the world (Kachru, 1992). Both teachers and teenagers need
to become aware of the complexities of discourse in relationships at school and home (see Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983; Horowitz, in press, a; Tannen, 1986). With an understanding of cultural diversity in discourse, teachers can design authentic literacy events.

**Principles for using authentic talk and literacy instruction**

According to Edelsky (1986, p. 170) authentic literacy events must meet several conditions: Learners must construct meaning through transactions with natural texts. They must use all language systems (graphic, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic) in processing texts. They must use predicting and confirming strategies in reading as well as composing strategies in writing.

In essence, authentic assignments and literacy strategies must allow students to use meaningful functional oral and written language. This language must be supported by other thinkers and talkers in the classroom reflecting the sociocultural context (Freeman & Freeman, 1992; Kucer, 1991; Myers, 1992).

With authenticity in mind, what are some principles for incorporating talk into literacy instruction in culturally diverse classrooms?

1. **Build classroom communities in which functional discourse is encouraged.**

Developing communicative competence in classroom communities requires managing the physical and social environment so that four types of authentic discourse may occur: thought discourse, fact discourse, sharing discourse, and fun discourse (Enright & McCloskey, 1988). Literacy events are authentic when teachers capitalize on discourse interaction in community-structured classrooms in which literacy is functional.

Teachers can encourage functional dialogue through dialogue journals. These are written conversations between teachers and students or students and students. The journals should facilitate the language growth of native and nonnative English speakers (Peyton & Reed, 1990; Staton, Shuy, Peyton, & Reed, 1988).

Lindfors (1989) reported a wide range of communicative functions represented in the dialogue journal writing of adolescent Zulu-English speakers in South Africa. These young adults used writing to teach, inquire, joke, inform, scold, offer, seek clarification, compliment, apologize, explain, express opinions, make conversational comments, express thanks, comfort, reflect.

Through dialogue, classroom participants can build social relationships, model good oral and written discourse strategies, expand background knowledge, and lead each other to elaborate on ideas, rather than focus only on specific reading and writing skills. Literacy functions and skills can be acquired naturally through the social dialogue process in classroom communities.

2. **Use authentic texts from the students’ cultural environment.**

Teachers may use various creative texts to develop students’ knowledge of culture and language.

Cross-cultural literature is a rich source of authentic reading for developing students’ multicultural awareness and authentic discourse literacy (Au, 1993). Good literature leads in a variety of ways to natural social interaction that encourages talk about text. For example, teachers can use literature for Readers Theater, role playing, creative dramatics, or choral speaking for real audiences in social classroom events. Learner-centered conversations about interesting ideas in literature facilitate continued literacy advancement. Engaging students in talking about literature promotes acquisition of school language and discourse (Allen, 1989; Tompkins & McGee, 1981).

In addition to literature, a wide variety of materials from everyday living can be used in literacy activities. Menus from ethnic restaurants can be used for learning about ethnic foods as well as the social interchanges involved in ordering meals. Health care discourse can be learned while using brochures from hospitals and clinics. Discourse about buying and selling cars can be learned by role-playing business transactions based on knowledge gained from reading brochures from auto dealerships. Students learning to fill out all types of forms should be supported by the social
talk that accompanies interpreting and processing forms.

Newspapers can also be a varied source for talking about the world, national, state, and local events and human interest features.

3. Use instructional strategies that incorporate authentic talk in the reading/writing process.

Immigrants and other students whose first language is not that of the classroom are able to compose and comprehend even though they do not have full control of the target language's structures (Goodman & Goodman, 1978; Hudelson, 1989). Both first and second language learners can acquire literacy when instructional strategies focus on process rather than on language structures alone. Many effective instructional strategies use culturally diverse authentic talk to support literacy: the Experience-Text-Relationship Method (Au, 1979), Language Experience Approach (well explained by Rigg, 1989), and reciprocal teaching and other collaborative learning strategies (Palincsar & David, 1991).

Language skills can be learned in the context of talk about revision of student texts in writing conferences (Farr & Daniels, 1986; Hudelson, 1989) and talk about ideas in reading conferences (Gunderson, 1991). Linguistic structures can be taught in the context of process-oriented strategies.

For more on theory and practice in second language reading, see Barnitz (1985), Bernhardt (1991), and Carrell, Devine, and Eskey (1988).

4. Incorporate cross-cultural discourse schema into authentic literacy instruction.

Cultural variation in background knowledge influences reading performance and must be considered in literacy instruction. Those who read texts that are not culturally familiar often read slower, miscomprehend, have more irrelevant intrusions, and make fewer elaborations than those who read culturally familiar texts (Barnitz, 1986; Carrell et al., 1988; Steffensen, 1987).

While learners bring their culturally diverse talk to learning to read and write, they also bring their culturally specific written styles and forms (Kaplan, 1987; Leki, 1991), which must not be overlooked in reading theory and instruction (see Barnitz, 1986). English prose tends to be linear and hierarchical, but prose in other languages and cultures may be more tolerant of circularity of discussion as well as digressions (Kaplan, 1987).

Instructional strategies, such as the Experience-Text-Relationship Method and the Language Experience Approach, are particularly sensitive to students' cultural schemata in aiding learners to connect their cultural worlds with the texts. Through much conversation about the ideas in the students' minds and those represented in the text, teachers guide learners in composing and comprehending written discourse.

5. Encourage cross-age interaction in schools, families, and community organizations.

Current literacy programs sometimes involve talking across ages in schools and families. Heath and Mangiola (1991) described a cross-age project in which fifth-grade ESL children tutored first graders. The older children also met with each other and team leaders to reflect and talk about their field notes and observations. These "children of promise" developed "literate behaviors" and discourse competence which contributed to their academic success.

Juel (1991) reported a program in which university athletes tutored at-risk children. Using self-selected novels, talk, and extensive writing in response journals, the children developed their literacy.

Quintero and Huerta-Macias (1990) described a program which enhanced literacy and biliteracy of both parents and children. Bilingual family literacy was strengthened by parent involvement, code switching between two languages, and whole-language-oriented strategies. Edwards (1989) was successful in teaching parents in a lower socioeconomic rural community to develop their children's literacy with literature and talking about books.

In addition, community agencies offer abundant opportunities for language and literacy growth because agency activities involve authentic talk (see Heath, 1993; Horowitz, in progress).

6. Assess literacy with authentic literacy tasks and texts.

Assessment of literacy performance and ability is more accurate if the tasks are authentic and
conform to non-test contexts (Bachman, 1992). In a culturally diverse society, Garcia and Pearson (1991) support authentic literacy assessment based on several criteria including: (a) Literacy assessment must include constructive reading and writing tasks that demonstrate learners’ actual performance. (b) Assessment should emphasize what students can and cannot do alone and with assistance from adults and peers on a variety of tasks reflecting students’ interests and background knowledge. (c) Variations in students’ interpretations need to be acknowledged—cultural diversity is an advantage, rather than a disadvantage to be penalized. (d) Members of the school and home community should be involved in literacy assessment.

In essence, discourse diversity and authentic talk must be considered in literacy assessment.

Conclusion
Authentic discourse, however diverse, can be supportive of literacy development. Learners cannot use or activate what they know about language and cultural knowledge if there is little social context. People in the real world interact socially in most literacy events. Authentic talk supports literacy because learners use the verbal cues from the entire text and situational context to assist them in constructing meaning.

Authenticity is a necessary condition for learners to be successful in developing literacy, but authenticity alone does not necessarily guarantee acquisition of literacy. Many learners will need specific language and literacy skill instruction, which can be embedded in authentic literacy activities.

With a solid knowledge base of sociolinguistic variation as represented in many of the references provided here, and with positive attitudes toward culturally diverse students, teachers can make decisions to design authentic literacy events in their multicultural classrooms. When teachers develop authentic literacy activities in their classrooms, there is a greater probability that all learners will acquire the widest range of discourse for literacy.

References

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