



# Fostering learning and democratic citizenship through the polyphonic and dialogic classroom

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# Survey of content

## Introduction

### I. Theory basis:

- I. View of learning, important concepts
- II. Different conceptions of dialogue, with a focus on Bakhtin

### II. How to create a polyphonic classroom

#### 3 important arenas:

1. Teacher led dialogic interaction in classrooms
2. Student led groups in different subjects
3. Writing and dialogic feedback

## Conclusion

# Functions of education (Gert Biesta)

- **Qualification:** knowledge, skills and attitudes that will either qualify students to do something, specifically in the manner of a profession or be applied in a more general sense throughout the course of a lifetime
- **Socialization:** how individuals become part of the existing socio-cultural, political and moral order
  - **Directly** through the content
  - **Indirectly** "work methods, norms and values that are validated"
- **Subjectification (individualization):** how the individual is given the opportunity to develop as a unique, distinctive, independent and responsible human being
- NB The three functions are intertwined

## A new (?) concern for educators

- How to prevent radicalization of young people?
- How to foster democratic citizenship?

Biesta & Lawry (2006): move from *learning about* democracy **to** learning democratic citizenship as *practice*

- Identification with public issues of common concern
- Creating a culture of participation, dialogue & deliberation

My claim: in polyphonic classrooms where pupils get used to participate and dialogue and where their voices are being heard, they develop a defence against undemocratic ideas and practices (Biesta: Work methods, norms & values in classroom)

”BILDUNG”

**SYSTEMATIC WORK OVER LONG TIME !**

**From an interview Nov 16th  
with a Bergen professor of education in  
the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks**



***”Pedagogy today does not deal with important topics on a deeper level of human life, like sorrow and fear. ...In school we need to build opp a cognitive and emotional capacity strong enough to deal with the fear that such attacks as those in Paris create.***

***We also need to cultivate a language to talk about the boredom many young people feel, their experience of being on the outside of society and not having any responsibility towards the state or society. These feelings are an enormous destructive force. The future of democracy is dependent on how well we are able to identify and meet the angry, disappointed losers in our communities”***

VÅRT LAND , Nov 16th 2015



## Theoretical view of learning – important concepts

# Learning

## Two definitions of learning:

- «Learning means acquisition and modification of knowledge, skills, strategies, attitude and behaviour» (Schunck, 2000).

**\*The main tradition in learning theory is individualistic**

- «Learning means to master activities, actions and linguistic discourses *within a community*» (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

**Sociocultural theory emphasize the community**

# Two metaphors of learning (Sfard 1998)

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- **Aquisition**

- Learning as individual gain  
(have/own/possess knowledge)
- Transmission of knowledge
- Learner as receiver of knowledge
- Teacher as informer, lecturer, helper

- **Participation**

- Community building (belong, communicate)
- Become a participant
- Learner as apprentice
- Teacher as expert participant, supervisor in collaboration, process and communication

**Sfard's point: we need both metaphors**

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Anna Sward, Nov 13. 2015



# Community

Z. Baumann (2000) *Lost community*



- Basic concepts: **safety and freedom**
- Individuality can only be understood in relation to community
- Community is given meaning through the individual
- Autonomy and order are preconditions for each other

”Social processes in general og productive work in particular must be **led** and cannot be left to its own drive” (p. 37)

**GOOD LEADERSHIP OF CLASSROOM LEARNING IS ALFA AND OMEGA**

# 'Polyphony' (multivoicedness)

**Mikhail Bakhtin**, Russian theoretician  
of language, literature and culture



1895-1975

'voice': the speaking personality

'heteroglossia': individual voices are formed by the language  
in different social groups (region, age, occupation)

'polyphony' many voices in music, none dominates:  
'the polyphonic novel' (Dostoevskij)

A school class is always polyphonic or multivoiced in the  
sense that it has many voices: pupils with different  
background, culture, experiences, abilities, knowledge ...

Challenge : **To use polyphony as a resource for learning**

# What characterizes a 'polyphonic classroom'?

## It is where every child or young person

- is in dialogue and interaction with others
- is a participant
- is seen and heard
- is engaged
- is given a voice
- has respect for other, different voices
- has professional self confidence
- learns to express oneself in writing, talking, and by using practical & esthetic means
- develops the urge and the ability to learn more + +



**Is the polyphonic learning community part of your school's vision?  
Which points do find most important? Why?**

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# The polyphonic classroom depends on **dialogue**

- **Between persons** (external dialogue)
  - Oral* dialogue
    - Pupil-pupil, pupil-teacher
  - Written dialogue
- **Between persons and text** (internal)
  - with textbook, lecture, picture etc
- **Between texts** (intertextuality)



## «School of Dialogue of Cultures Pedagogical Movement» in Ukraine & Russia

- Started by philosophers and teachers 1990ies
- Goal: to involve pupils in dialogue in all subjects in elem. school, with the great cultures and thinkers of the past in sec.
- Theoretical background:
  - Theoretical ideas about children's cognitive development as mirror of the development of cultures
  - Hegel, Bakhtin, Bibler
- Practice: i.e. «History of World Culture» course, Ochag Gymnasium, Kharkov, Ukraine. «A holistic dialogic course in the humanities» 6-11 gr

*Source: Journal of Russian and East European Psychology, 47/2009.*

Articles by Solomadin & Kurganov ++. Introduction by Eugene Matusov

# Different theoretical conceptions of dialogue



- **Every day language:** face to face conversation  
Ideal: based on equality, reciprocity, and trust
- **Platon/Sokrates:** argumentation free of power  
– The Socratic conversation as pedagogic ideal?
- **Buber:** focus on relations (I-you) and  
the meeting with “the Other”
- **Habermas:** content-and consensus oriented:  
”Discursive ethics”- “the best argument wins”
- **Freire:** instrument for political liberation
- **Bakhtin:** meaning and understanding is created  
through interaction: when different voices confront  
each other

# BAKHTIN´ s view of dialogue (my understanding)

## Three aspects

### I: Ontological: Dialogue is the fundamental principle in life

- «Life is dialogic in its nature» (Bakhtin 1979: 113) basis of human existence
- “to live means to participate in dialogue: to ask, listen, answer, argue and so on” (Voloshinov/Bakhtin 1973:318)
- the relationship between me and “the other” (agree with Buber)

### II. Epistemological: Meaning and understanding is created through dialogue

- “a bridge between the speaker and listener, writer and reader”
- “a spark between two poles”
- Confrontation between voices

### III. Dialogue as opposition to monologue

where there is no room for questions and doubt)

# An existential view of dialogue

Buber & Bakhtin

To place dialogue in the centre of human existence has consequences for what fundamental values set their mark on the community in a kindergarten, a school, and a home

For instance:

- What value do we place on building relations?
- How to foster trust, mutual respect and *seeing* the other?

**THE TEACHER AS MODEL**

**Creating good relations in the classroom is a prerequisite for dialogue**



# Bakhtin's dialogic model of communication

(How meaning and knowledge is created)

The traditional model is monologic

Sender - Message – Recipient

- Has dominated classroom teaching for ages: that pupils learn when teachers talk

Bakhtin:

**We create meaning – knowledge (learning)**

- “the listener becomes a co-producer of meaning”
- “use each other's word as a thinking tool” (Lotman)
- Most productive when different voices confront each other



**What model dominates in classrooms in your school?**

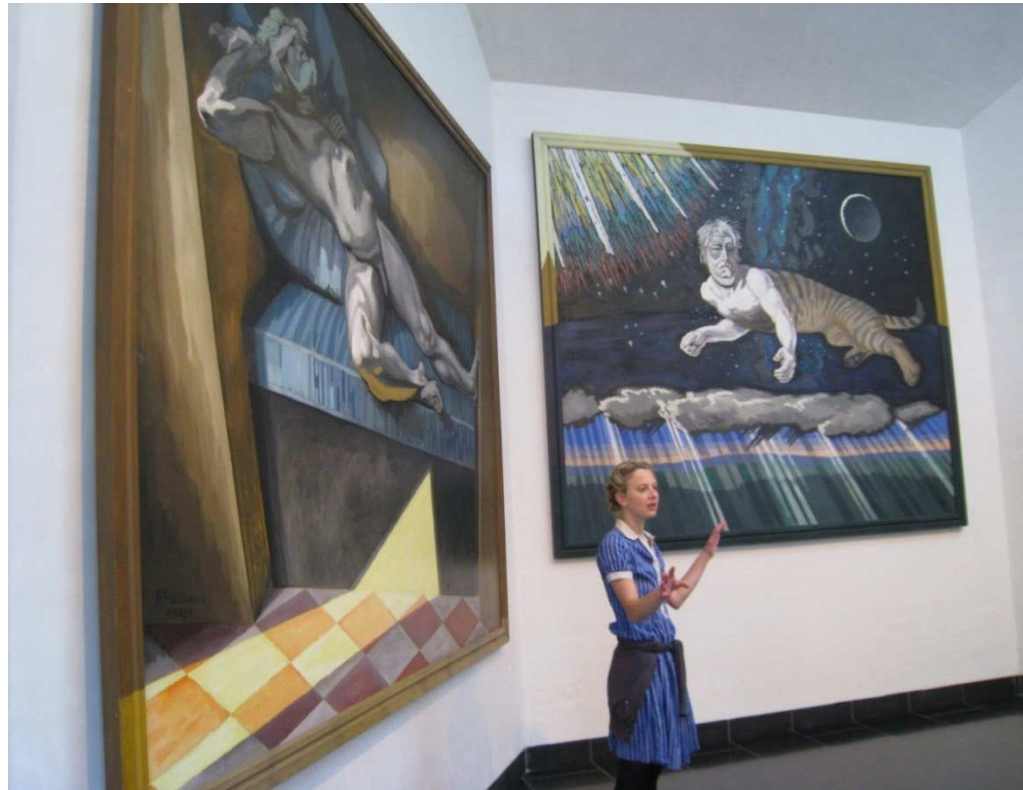
# Difference and disagreement: important for learning

Bakhtins theory: It is not enough that different voices exist. It is the differences, divergences and tension between them that create opportunity for a deeper understanding and for new thoughts (learning and creativity)

## Four examples of how to use this in your classroom:

1. Start your lessons with a question or a problem (raise curiosity)
2. Encourage and use disagreement as a resource («No answers are wrong»)
3. Lift up different 'voices', opinions, solutions and discuss them
4. Encourage pupils to think around different alternatives

*All forms of teaching can be dialogic or monologic:*



The test: Does your teaching open or close for curiosity, questions, further thinking?

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## II. HOW TO BUILD AND DEVELOP THE POLYPHONIC CLASSROOM



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# Dialogue based teaching

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR PRACTICE?

Is it what good teachers have always done?

## WHAT IS NEW?

Systematic approach over long time + "strategies"

- Actively promote pupil's production of meaning (knowledge) through dialogue and collaboration
- Encourage engagement with other voices
- Value difference and divergence



Polyphony - Participation - Variation

# 1. TEACHER LED CONVERSATIONS

monologic or dialogic?



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# Different types of teacher led conversations in the classroom

«Assessment talk»: Inquiry, Response, Evaluation (right or wrong)

- Purpose: the teacher asks questions to check what the pupils know  
The teacher knows the right answer

## Learning dialogues

• Purpose:

- 1) introduction to new material
- 2) work together on new material (plenary or groups)
  - Problem solving
  - Exploration
- 3) consolidation of learning

**Discussion:** (Example: Should begging be forbidden by law?)

- Purpose: convince others through good arguments
- Defend and 'attack'
- Critical testing of arguments

# Nystrand's study of 100 classrooms

«Opening Dialogue» 1997

- IRE- talk dominated – A school culture of right & wrong
- Dialogic talk ( ‘conversation’ )

How to start

- authentic questions
- uptake & high evaluation
- Most important: the teacher builds on the pupil's answer (uptake)
- If the teacher showed genuine interest in what pupils said, even inauthentic questions functioned well
- Who did best on tests?

New studies of Norwegian classrooms: individual work still dominated



**What would researchers find at your school?**



# Example of teacher led dialogue from one of my case studies

(Dysthe: *The multivoiced classroom*, 1996)

Context: 'Baywater' high school, California, class 12. Students are Mexican immigrants, Asian immigrants & Black students

Subject: American history

Topic: The class had studied The American Civil War and the situation of the slaves for several weeks

- Teaching pattern: the pupils were asked to write the last 7 minutes of each lesson. Assignment: "What does freedom mean to you? Have you ever lost your freedom?"

- The teacher read the texts at home and picked out quotations which she used to trigger discussion in class

**Student quotation:** "Freedom means the ability to do anything anytime a person wants to. But everyone has to obey some rules"

**Ann:** What do you think about that? Is that true?

**Authentic question**

**Flere:** Yeah

**Kenyatta:** No. Cause there's lot of free who'r not free.

**Male pupil:** You are not free when you must obey laws.

**Ann:** No laws?

**Uptake**

**Kenyatta:** Yeah, freedom means no laws.

**Ann:** So to you freedom means no laws?.

**Uptake, high evaluation**

**Kenyatta:** No laws, no rules, no letting nobdy telling you what to do.

**Several pupils interrupt and protest.**

**Ann:** OK. Caleb says that's anachy, and Kenyatta says, well that's what she keeps saying, that we really aren't free. fri. If we follow rules, does that mean that we aren't free?

**Clarifies differences of opinion, disagreements**

**Male pupil:** No

**Kenyatta:** But you don't actually have to follow rules..

**Rhonda:** So you want to live in a soceity where there is no order and you can walk outside and get killed !

**Kenyatta:** I'll be fre, and I'll be free to be dead.

**Rhonda:** (upset) We've got to have some kind of rules.

**Ann:** There is a philosopy called anarchism, and a person who really believes this

...

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**Ny 'input' - minilecture**

# Writing before talking increases participation



Vygotskij: the importance of language for learning

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## How the teacher used mini-writing to trigger the conversation

Kirsten asks for examples of words they have written

- Students: “Stamina, Hitler, demonstrations, war, new, modern, exploration, motorway, industry”

Teacher: What did you find important? Would you please share the three most important things with us? (authentic)

- Student: War, anger and destruction.

Teacher : War, anger and destruction.. What made you think about those three words? (uptake)

- Student: Well, war – because we see that there is fighting.

Teacher : Because we see that there is fighting? (uptake)

- Student: Yes

Teacher: Yes. This is war.

- Student: And we can see that they are angry.

Teacher : How do you see that they are angry? What in the picture shows you that they are angry? (follow up)

- Student: I am not quite sure ... but as Jonas said earlier...Hitler looks angry

# A teaching pattern for participation and learning (in all subjects and at all levels):

1. Individual writing or drawing
2. Sharing in groups of 3-4
3. Reporting and whole class talk

- As introduction to a new topic (we think – we know – we want to know)
- Introduction to class discussion
- «What have we learnt?» 'Consolidation'

# Conclusion of a lesson or a project – dialogue to consolidate learning



- What have we done?
- What have we learnt?
- Pupils' interpretation of the period/day or teacher summary?

Several research studies of Norwegian classrooms show that this rarely happens, even though teachers know the importance.



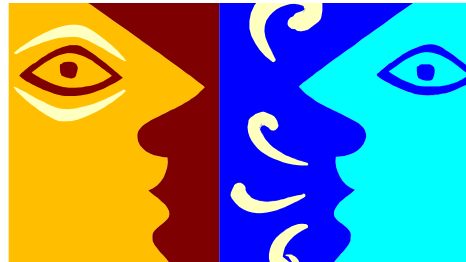
**What would researchers find if they study your classroom or school?**

# THINK, WRITE, SHARE



How can you improve your learning dialogues in your own classrooms (school)?  
Which ideas can you use?

Share



## 2. DIALOGIC INTERACTION IN STUDENT GROUPS



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## Two types of pupil led groups

- Short group sequences as part of structured learning processes – usually ending with a teacher led plenary session
- Workshop groups (where pupils work together to solve an assignment or a project in different subjects) Written or oral reports

# Polyphony through short group assignments

The groups report immediately in teacher led plenary



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# Project assignment

Groups solve a problem through collaboration + product



- Short time
- Brainstorming
- Explorative
- Different proposals
- Argumentation
- Problem solving discussion
- Consensus
- Product

## Example of group conversation as an everyday teaching method

### Teaching addition of fractions in a Japanese class

- The pupils get the task to add  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{1}{3}$ . There are three different suggestions of how to do this
- The class votes
- Each group discusses *the reasons* for their way of solving the problem
- Confrontation between different solutions
  - No answers are labeled wrong! All the voices contribute and are important because they give opportunity for discussion
  - This creates engagement and interest for *understanding* why one way of doing it gives the correct answer

# ”THINKING TOGETHER”

Mercer: the most prominent dialogue pedagogue in Europe

- **Research studies of children’s oral culture in classrooms**
- **Theoretical basis: Vygotskij & Bakhtin**
  - **To become an educated person: to use language in special ways**

How to use language for learning and teaching in the classroom to make pupils **think together**

How dialogue can foster shared meaning making and give pupils tools for intellectual activities

  - **Research findings: 3 types of types of talk among children in groups: **disputational, cumulative, explorative talk****
  - **Consensus vs disagreement: Mercer chooses to let the groups work towards consensus because it may give them a deeper engagement in the problems than just agreeing to disagree**

# What is needed to make collaborative groups work?

«Pupils must *learn* how to work together, talk together, think together»

- The teacher models dialogic values (i.e. listen, show respect)
- The groups discuss and decide common rules for their group:
  - “We share ideas and listen to one another”
  - “We speak one at a time”
  - “We respect one another’s opinions”
  - “ We give reasons that explain our ideas”
  - “When we disagree, we ask why.
  - “We try to agree in the end”
- The groups work towards consensus

*Dialogue and the development of childrens’ thinking* (Mercer & Littleton 2007)

# "Deliberative talk" – designed to foster democratic citizenship

Habermas inspired

Advocated by T. Englund (professor in Ørebro, Sweden)

- Student group discussions of topical issues
  - Phase 1: polyphonic, productive, disagreements
  - Phase 2: deliberative, weighing arguments
  - Phase 3: trying to reach consensus

Takes place regularly throughout the year

# Digital tools can promote a polyphonic learning community

Wegerif collaborated w Mercer about projects in primary school  
What is the role of technology?

## ”Dialogic space”

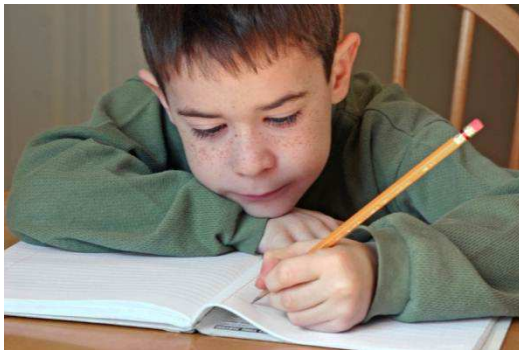
Not *primarily* a tool for learning  
but «technology expands  
and deepens the dialogical  
space by bringing in more  
voices»



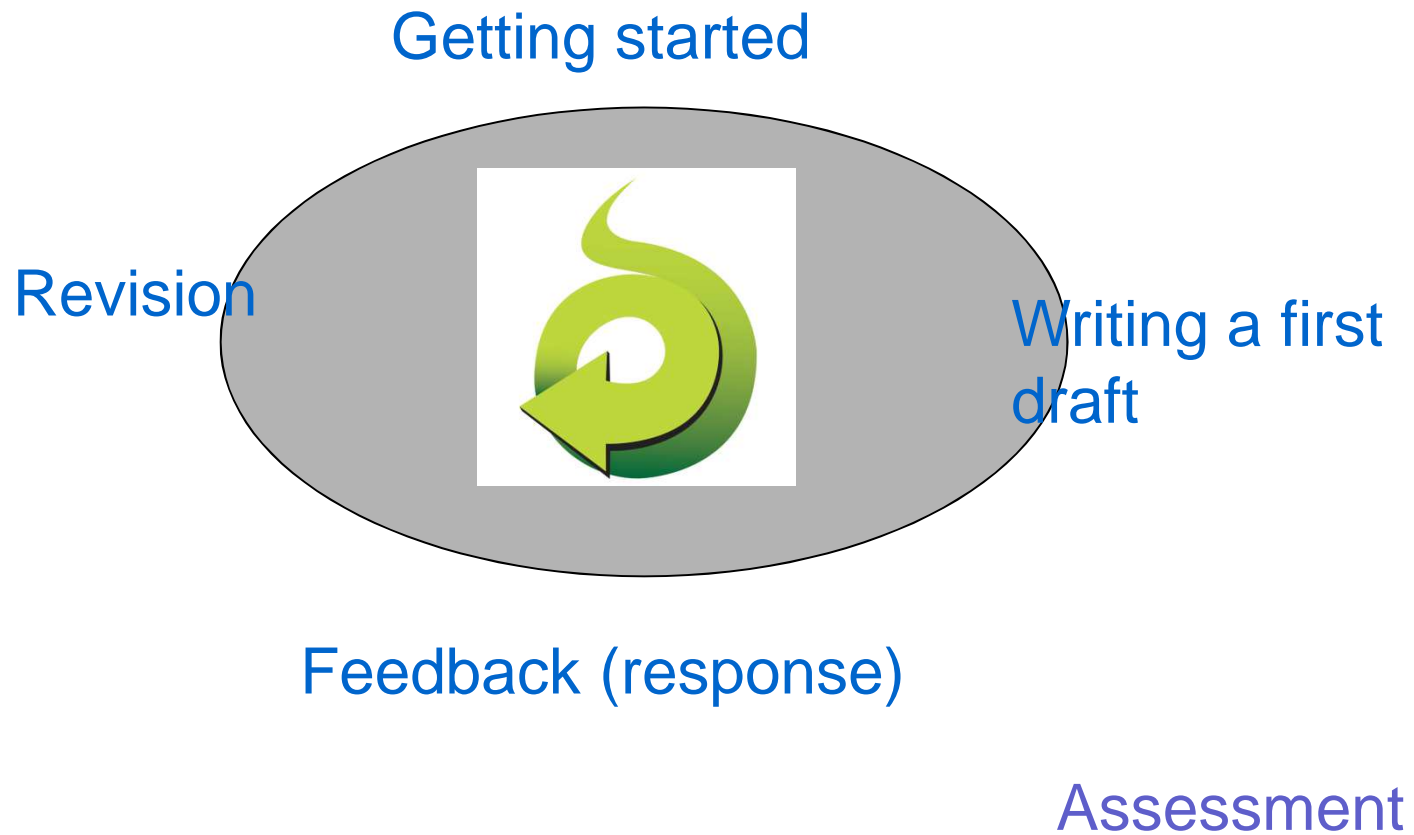
Wegerif, R. (2007) *Dialogic education and technology.  
Expanding the space of learning*



### 3. What role does dialogue play in writing and feedback in the polyphonic classroom?



# Where in the writing process is polyphony a resource?



Peer response in groups? In class?  
Netbased? ('polyphonic feedback')



Example from one of my case studies:

## Writing as a tool for learning

Dialogue through writing and talking

- 'Role writing' in social science: Topic: Criminality

2 variations:

- 1. Divide class in 3, pupils write one text each, different i each group

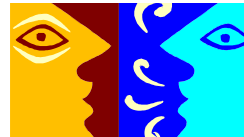


- 2. Each pupil **writes** 3 texts, from the point of view of 3 different persons

Assignment:

- a. You are a young person who has committed a crime
- b. You are one of the parents of this youth
- c. You are a member of society who is appalled by the increased criminality in the neighbourhood

- READ ALOUD
- DISCUSS IN GROUPS



# «It is the teacher's responsibility to give the students the tools they need to succeed»

- Example from one of my classroom studies: A multicultural Advanced Placement English Literature class in California

**Context:** Paula (coming from a disadvantaged school background:

*«I want to quit this class. I cannot talk like them»*

**Teacher:** «The tools she and all students need to do well in school can only be developed within the class community – and I am responsible»

**Change:** from free to *structured* student activities.

She modelled and taught them for example **how to:**

\*work with a novel or poem, \*discuss in groups, \*use quotes to exemplify (underpin) their opinion of literature, \*write a critical essay, \*give feedback to fellow students, \*use feedback to improve text

\*Rules for interaction \***Strong structure with great freedom**

«Opportunity spaces for dialogic pedagogy in a test oriented school» (Dysthe 2012)

If the teacher is the key to a polyphonic classroom  
- who is responsible for teaching the teachers ?



My traditional village classroom

My grandchildren's classroom





THANKS FOR LISTENING!

Liv Dysthe Sønderland 2012

[olga.dysthe@uib.no](mailto:olga.dysthe@uib.no)

A final writing task: WRITE DOWN ONE QUESTION YOU  
WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS OR HEAR MORE ABOUT

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