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*Iranian Journal
of
Language Teaching Research*

BOOK REVIEW



Urmia University

***Teaching Literature Using Dialogic Literary Argumentation.* Matt Seymour, Theresa Thanos, George E. Newell and David Bloome. Routledge (2020). xx +154 pp.**

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While through the concept of dialogism, Mikhail Bakhtin decenters authors from their authoritarian position in Dostoevskian polyphonic novels (pp. 67-68), the authors of this book, David Bloome, George E. Newell, Matt Seymour, and Theresa Thanos, propose dialogic teaching as an approach to displacing teachers from their authoritarian position as the sole “dispenser of an academic tradition” in English language arts classes (p. 125). As Bakhtin argues, Dostoevsky's heroes are “not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse” (p. 7). In a similar vein, in *Dialogic Literary Argumentation* (henceforth DLA) students are subjectively involved in their own learning process by interactive inquiry with their peers, the teacher, and the text. Comprising eight chapters along with a Foreword written by Richard Beach and an Afterword by the authors, *Teaching Literature Using Dialogic Literary Argumentation* introduces dialogic approach as an alternative method of teaching and learning literature in secondary schools in the U.S. Each chapter elaborates on various dynamics of this approach by examining different classroom activities.

Chapter 1, *On the Current State of Teaching Literature in High School Classrooms and Why We Should not be Settling for it*, begins with a brief survey of the justification of teaching literature in American schools across the 20th century. The authors draw on Arthur Applebee's insight emphasizing the significance of cultural dialogue in literature classes. They highlight the function of literature as it creates opportunities for students to discuss what it means “to be human with others at this time in this place” (p. 3). In the classroom environment, students can exchange their views and values; such social interactions are required to develop a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of human.

Chapter 2, *What is Dialogic Literary Argumentation?*, defines DLA together with its six main principles to be fleshed out in the next six chapters. As the authors contend, DLA invites students to reflect on human beings across diverse racial, cultural, social, and national boundaries. Unlike feminism for example or Marxism which offers definite frameworks for literary analysis,

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 10.30466/ijltr.2022.121189

DLA gives priority to students' individual understanding of themselves and the world by valuing their position as "active knowledge makers" (p. 17). It is also worthy of note that DLA does not expect students to reach a unanimous agreement in class discussions; what matters is students' growth in the course of their dialogue and their respect for diversity.

Chapter 3, *Reading and Writing about Literature as Social and Dialogic*, contends that reading and writing about literary works are both social and dialogic. The authors argue that when students read together in the class or alone at home, when they write silently in a journal or compose an assignment for class, they have an audience. While reading and writing, they interact with others, share their beliefs, and reconfigure their conception of the self and the world. The authors then observe a class where the teacher assigns several literary texts to students to read from the perspective of DLA. What concerns the teacher is not what the students understand but how they reach that understanding together by building dialogic interactions with the teacher, the author, and other students. These social and dialogic interactions widen students' appreciation of literary works and this is a key feature of DLA as these collective understandings affect the way students interact with others in real life.

Chapter 4, *Embracing Tensions*, examines how by arguing-to-learn students come to validate their peers' conflicting rationalities. When these juxtaposed ideas are exchanged through dialogue, students come to understand that there are different rationalities and possibilities across cultures for understanding literature and the world. This is called "dialogic rationality" (p. 57). In dialogic rationality, diverse philosophies are discussed among the students in a class. By accepting tensions, students understand that there are alternative views on understanding personhood in a particular time and place. Hence, DLA underscores a multiplicity of perspectives; however, this should not be taken as relativism which takes all ideologies as acceptable. This multiplicity is regarded "as an aspect of argumentation that bears further inquiry and exploration" (p. 22).

Chapter 5, *Dialogic Literary Argumentation as Exploration of Personhood and the Human Condition*, defines personhood. The authors contend that DLA involves students with serious reflections on how to be human together by considering diverse racial, cultural, social, and ideological frameworks. In such an interactive context, students come to comprehend personhood in a wider scope. When students listen to multiple understandings of personhood in literary texts, they realize that there is no fixed or universal definition of personhood. This is how students learn to appreciate the complexity of being human across cultures.

Chapter 6, *Dialogic Literary Argumentation and Learning to Take Risks*, explores how teachers take risks in the selection of their literary materials for the class and how they encourage their students to engage in the discussion of risky "societal issues" dialogically (p. 92). The dialogic argumentation of literary works expands students' understanding of the world in which they live. The authors examine a multi-racial and multi-cultural class in which the teacher asks students to read Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, a novel about racial inequality. As the leader of the discussion, the teacher should help students to discuss how one can be a human amid racial discrimination and unending ideological brutality. The students, as the authors argue, should feel safe discussing such controversial issues in the class.

Chapter 7, *Providing Feedback on Students' Written Dialogic Literary Arguments*, proposes how teachers should assess students' writing assignments in DLA classes. As the authors contend, writing argumentative essays proves to be challenging as students might be mainly engaged with a "structural focus" rather than an "ideational" one (p. 112). Not only should students observe the component elements of an essay in their writings, but they also need to develop arguments. DLA emphasizes the role of teachers in providing constant helpful feedback and guidance to students. Students need the teacher's guidance on how to incorporate their ideas into their essays.

Chapter 8, *Conceptualizing Dialogic Literary Argumentation across the Academic Year*, explains how DLA can be taught in different ways in literature classes. The authors examine two year-long class curriculums: in one class, the teacher assesses students based on their writing assignments; and in the other, the emphasis is on the choice of literary work. The authors discuss the constraints and advantages of taking up these approaches within the DLA context emphasizing the role of literature in providing opportunities for students to interact with one another, learn together, and evolve in the course of their argumentations.

In *Afterword: Reflections on the Challenges of Teaching Literature through Dialogic Literary Argumentation*, the authors address the important features of this approach as guidelines offered by teachers who have already implemented it in their literature classes to those teachers who are planning to use it. All in all, in this insightful book, the authors nicely attempt to clarify various features of DLA by attending actual classrooms and by carefully observing a series of classroom events set in multicultural contexts in which students were from different family backgrounds, ethnicity, language, race, gender, social class, and religion. What basically matters in DLA approach is the diversity of viewpoints and interpretations which are to broaden students' comprehension of the self and the world. Considering this key aspect, it seems that this approach can be more successful in multiracial and multicultural contexts like the U.S. rather than in less racially and culturally diverse countries. Definitely, in unanimous contexts, students hold diverse perspectives as well but this diversity can be much more palpable in multiracial and multicultural settings.

References

Bakhtin, M. (1984). Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics. (Ed. and Trans. by Caryl Emerson). Minnesota University Press.