

Authentic, Dialogic Writing: The Case of a Letter to the Editor

A teacher educator reflects on the educational value of an authentic writing assignment inspired by real-world local events.

An article entitled “Pupils Persevere” (Cullen) covered the front page of Madison’s local newspaper in February 2005. The article, whose sub-heading read “Problem Students Get Another Chance at Affiliated Alternatives School in Madison,” was promptly posted on several bulletin boards throughout Affiliated Alternatives. Highlighting the plight of four alternative programs in Madison’s public school system, the article both angered and pleased students at this school. Although the central point of the front-page article was a plea for a larger physical facility to house all four alternative programs, the article profiled several students who were currently attending Affiliated Alternatives.

Though these profiles largely portrayed the student population at Affiliated Alternatives as comprised of “problem students,” several students expressed pride that their school was featured on the front page of the local newspaper. In fact, many students were quick to tell each other they had been interviewed by the article’s author. The following week, however, the paper ran a letter to the editor that responded to the front-page feature story. This letter focused exclusively on Affiliated Alternatives’ School Age Parent program and was written by a gentleman, Jim Kubek, who had lived in the community of Madison for several years. Although he was not familiar with Affiliated Alternatives until reading about the school in the article entitled “Pupils Persevere,” Mr. Kubek had strong opinions about how he felt the school was enabling students in making poor choices in their lives.

One facet of Kubek’s letter focused on his cousin, a young woman in her teens, who had quit

high school years ago to raise her child, born out of wedlock. Kubek was clear in stating that his cousin made a responsible choice in choosing to work to support her child, versus remaining in school. Though Kubek’s letter commended the teachers and staff at Affiliated Alternatives for showing kindness and commitment to their students, he also overtly accused Affiliated Alternatives of enabling what he considered to be poor choices in students’ lives, thereby promoting a bleak future for students attending the school.

Responding to the “Real World”

Kubek’s letter caused great uproar among students at Affiliated Alternatives. Paper in hand, three students burst into Bob Schaefer’s third-hour English class the day of the letter’s printing with lots to say. Some students wanted to seek revenge by confronting Kubek personally. Others remarked at how contradictory the letter was, saying, “Aren’t we taking responsibility by staying in school?”

Kubek’s letter, in presenting a “real world” context for writing and responding, ultimately urged Affiliated Alternatives students to talk back to the ways in which they, as teen mothers and students, were characterized in Kubek’s letter to the editor. Over the course of the two days following the appearance of the letter to the editor, Schaefer disrupted the current unit he and his students were involved in to assist the students in drafting a letter to the editor. Writing a letter to the editor was not a lesson that was “planned” by Schaefer. Instead, it arose as an important site for learning within Affiliated Alternatives’ English curriculum. Schaefer

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embraced this authentic writing activity and prompted students to write a letter to the editor.¹ As a participant-observer at Affiliated Alternatives for a year and a half, I had the opportunity to become familiar with Schaefer's curricular choices and, throughout this article, have chosen to highlight this particular writing activity's potential for *authentic* learning. In witnessing the ways that Affiliated Alternatives students responded to the call to write for a concrete and meaningful purpose, I became privy to the power of authentic writing instruction with "at risk" teens.

Connecting Authentic Writing Instruction to Principles of Dialogism

During Affiliated Alternatives students' process of writing a letter to the editor in response to Kubek, several questions entered my mind concerning students' production of *authentic* text. Though I had seen students write book talks and respond to literature they had read for class with analyses of characters, I was particularly interested in how writing a letter to the editor captured the attention of Affiliated Alternatives students in ways that other writing activities had not. I began to articulate my questions as the following:

- What made Affiliated Alternatives students' letter writing an *authentic* writing activity?
- In what ways did Affiliated Alternatives students' *authentic* writing respond to their status as teen mothers and adolescents?
- How can educators harness the power of this particular writing activity in ways to bring it forward into future writing instruction?

To approach my questions, I began to define what I meant by the term *authentic*. In thinking about this, I recognized the importance and relevance of two theoretical terms, *dialogic* and *dialogism*, and these terms helped me better understand why writing a letter to the editor was indeed evidence of what I was calling *authentic* writing. The two terms, *dialogic* and *dialogism*, attributed to Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, articulate the philosophy that utterances (distinct pieces of spoken or

written text) always respond to and anticipate other utterances. *Dialogism*, then, as a theory, is primarily concerned with the idea that *all* language is produced as response to other language. Thus, a central tenet of viewing text as *dialogic* highlights the "action" utterances one text makes in relation to other texts. I knew that viewing all text as participating in "action" with other texts would assist me in understanding part of what made this particular writing activity *authentic* to Affiliated Alternatives students. I also recognized that viewing *all* text, whether spoken or written, as purposeful—that is, all text works to respond to something, and therefore works to make meaning—was key in understanding the power of writing a letter to the editor. Since the purpose of such an activity was highly motivating to Affiliated Alternatives students, I was able to see that writing text that was purposeful and meaningful, as well as in dialogue with other texts, was at the core of the meaning of *authentic* writing.

Drawing specifically on the term *dialogic* also helped me explain the relationship that individuals have to the texts they write. In *Opening Dialogue: Understanding the Dynamics of Language and Learning in the English Classroom*, English educator Martin Nystrand and his colleagues articulate a *dialogic* view of text and utterances as "fundamentally different from the common view that utterances are the independent expressions of thoughts by speakers, an account that starts with thoughts and ends with words and verbal articulation. Rather, because they respond to other utterances at the same time that they anticipate other utterances, they are 'sequentially contingent' upon each other" (11). Nystrand et al. emphasize the responsive, and therefore *dialogic*, quality of all text. In viewing texts through this lens, we see the letter written by Affiliated Alternatives students not just as their independent thoughts; rather, the students' text exists as a *response*—both materially and ideologically—to another text.

I urge educators to promote authentic writing in the English classroom through the viewing and teaching of text as *dialogic*, and through this lens, it becomes possible to understand the texts that students produce in class as *responses* to other texts. A *dialogic* understanding of text also makes it possible for educators to identify the reasons why students

find writing particular kinds of texts—texts that *respond* to real-world issues—so motivating.

Pregnant and Parenting Teens: A Unique Group of Students

Characterizing the letter to the editor written by students at Affiliated Alternatives as *authentic* and *dialogic* has special significance for the schooling of teen mothers. Researcher Wendy Luttrell has noted that pregnant and parenting students have typically been labeled as being “at risk” of school failure and have been dominantly schooled through a “basic skills” model of instruction. Little attention has been given to how teen mothers may employ authentic or dialogic principles when composing text. A curriculum that emphasizes “basic skills” stresses a deficit view of individuals who are placed “at risk” and aims to remediate these individuals through skill-driven teaching and learning techniques rather than through meaningful engagement with material or other learners. Because of their status as teen mothers, Affiliated Alternatives students are immediately defined as being “at risk.” This stigmatization has been noted by researchers working with this population, including Wanda Pillow, Dierdre M. Kelly, and Heidi L. Hallman as entrenching a basic skills curriculum in many schools for pregnant and parenting teens.

“Affiliated Alternatives Defended”: Affiliated Alternatives Students’ Letter to the Editor

The text that Affiliated Alternatives students wrote as a response to Kubek’s letter was entitled “SAPAR Defended.” One week after Kubek’s letter appeared in the local newspaper, the following letter to the editor was printed in the editorial column of Madison’s local newspaper:

We know people think that we get special attention in the School Age Parent (SAPAR) and other programs at the Affiliated Alternative school because we are teen parents and students behind in credits. We still have to do work, we still get grades and credits for what we do. If we don’t keep up our part of the deal, we will fail just like in a “regular” school.

Many of us have worked before, through and after our pregnancies. We are full-time students

trying to get an education to get better jobs and set good goals for our children. This alternative program is only available for students in need of help, so we can finish school and have a chance to stay on the right track.

We are not bad people; we are just normal people who have run into some bumps in life’s highway that slowed us down a little bit. By being in this school, we can overcome these bumps and fix our mistakes. Isn’t it better to get a little help now than have to depend on others for the rest of our lives? Don’t judge us; just try to understand where we are coming from and why this school is here to help us.

The letter to the editor by Alisa Wilborn, Christine Williams, Precious Jackson, and Tiffany Graham made other Affiliated Alternatives students proud. Many students were surprised that the letter had actually been printed, and several students brought copies for Schaefer to post on the classroom bulletin board. When they saw their letter in the local paper, more than one student said, “I didn’t actually think they’d print this.”

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Reading Affiliated Alternatives Students’ Text as Authentic and Dialogic

At that core of *dialogism* is the belief that all texts respond to other texts. We can see first of all that the Affiliated Alternatives students’ letter to the editor exists as a material response to Kubek’s letter. The material reality of the students’ letter—and especially the fact that it was eventually printed in the local newspaper—holds significance for Affiliated Alternatives students and emphasizes the letter’s *authenticity*—its purpose and meaning. The subject of the letter, teen parenthood, is also a “real” subject to these students, and several students expressed an awareness that people in the larger society often find fault with the choices that they, as teen mothers, have made in their lives.

The opening line of the students’ letter, “We know people think that we get special attention in the School Age Parent (SAPAR) and other programs

at the Affiliated Alternative school” references the theme of “enabling poor choices” that runs throughout Kubek’s letter. Within their letter, the students make a smart move—a *dialogic* move—with Kubek

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by positing the idea that the students’ experience at Affiliated Alternatives may indeed assist them in “getting help now rather than [having] to depend on others for the rest of our lives” (rather than enable future poor choices, as Kubek

suggests). As is clear in the letter the students author, *authentic* writing—writing that is purposeful, meaningful, and engaging—goes hand in hand with dialogic principles of reading and writing text, thereby emphasizing the ways that all texts work to respond to other texts.

Affiliated Alternatives students also pose a strong rhetorical question in their letter when they ask: “Isn’t it better to get a little help now than have to depend on others for the rest of our lives?” This question responds directly to Kubek’s letter.

In fact, the students’ statement challenges his claims by calling attention to the lack of validity in his understanding of responsibility. The nature of the students’ response—a response that references the claims his letter makes yet does not overtly chastise Kubek’s views—enables the students to urge Kubek (and readers who agree with him) to rethink his initial stance. The *dialogic* stance they take throughout their letter is purposeful and has real connections to how Affiliated Alternatives students, as a group of teen mothers, students, and adolescents, feel they are perceived by society.

Responding to Characterizations of Teen Motherhood

Beyond a material response to the letter, the students’ letter to the editor also responds to the way they, as a group, feel that society has characterized them as teen mothers. The students’ letter clearly seeks to challenge the view that early motherhood ultimately hinders future academic success. At the same time, the students’ letter voices a desire for



acceptance by society. Moving back and forth between strong assertions and pleas for nonjudgment suggests that Affiliated Alternatives students are responding to multiple views about teen motherhood that they know exist in the larger society.

On an interesting note, Kubek does not respond to multiple views concerning teen motherhood. His letter espouses ideologies that find fault with the girls themselves, the school's response to the girls, and the way society responds to the issue of teen pregnancy. As a result of these views, Kubek is unable to take on the students' point of view. His letter is one-dimensional and argues only his point. Though his letter is in dialogue with his view of teen motherhood, he fails to respond to multiple perspectives on the issue.

Connecting Authentic Writing to Students' Future Success

Affiliated Alternatives students' letter to the editor has several implications for future writing instruction not just with students deemed as being "at risk," but with all students. In drawing attention to both Kubek's letter to the editor and the students' letter to the editor, I have highlighted the ways in which Affiliated Alternatives students are able to view their writing as purposeful and meaningful. Through an examination of the students' letter, it is clear that the students were able to make and support claims that are complex and multidimensional. Through the process of crafting their letter, they were able to position themselves in dialogue with Kubek as well as in dialogue with societal views concerning teen motherhood.

Looking closely at this particular writing activity demands that educators examine the ways all students respond to more than just the "formal," dictated curriculum. As shown in this example, opportunities such as writing a letter to the editor exist as crucial sites for educators' examination, as these are the authentic activities that frequently stress student "action" and response in the classroom. Further, the writing and publishing of the letter is itself evidence that curriculum in the English classroom can engage students in responding to "real" events in the world that concern them.

Contrary to participating in a "basic skills"—focused curriculum, the activity of writing a letter to the editor prompted Affiliated Alternatives students to engage in much more than rote memorization or remedial-type skills. Calling attention to the success of such authentic writing activities, like those highlighted through this example, can assist us, as educators, in refiguring dominant models of instruction for those students who are frequently labeled most "at risk." 

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Note

1. Editor's note: While the assignment in this essay appeared serendipitously, it is possible for English teachers to create a classroom context that promotes authentic writing assignments. See Elizabeth Kahn's "From the Secondary Section" in this issue for excellent suggestions.

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