Angela's Story

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For many of us who teach, preplanning is that brief period of time in late summer before school hallways flood with students and when teachers are supposed to be planning lessons and readying rooms for the upcoming weeks. In actuality, most of preplanning is spent in mandated meetings. Still, during one such time, I managed to find an open period in which to roam the relatively quiet halls of my high school and peek into the rooms of some of my colleagues.

As I wandered, I noticed that several teachers had posted what were supposed to be inspirational posters on the wall next to their doors. I'm sure you've seen similar ones; they often feature a drenched cat or majestic eagle, the "You can do it!" sort of posters. I also noticed similar posters hung next to the clock or by the pencil sharpener inside the classrooms. Based on the obvious placement outside and around the interior of the room, it was clear that these posters were meant to be seen every day by students.

Some of the posters were commenting on bad attitudes. One specifically read, "The attitude STOPS here!" As I passed this poster, I wondered how the kids would feel about being met with such a message before they've even met this person on the other side of the door. Though each student will not enter the room with the assumed chip on their shoulder, each student is met with this message regardless. I wondered if the assumption, so clearly stated to them as they entered, would lead to only developing negative tension in the classroom, and thus create the attitude the poster owner so wanted to avoid.

While such posters are hung at the beginning of each year with good intentions, they can be seen as, depending on the student and the day, demands rather than requests. Such messages posit the student in a powerless position and situate the teacher, whom the students may not have even met yet, as a voice of authority. A tension is already created before teacher and class have even uttered a word to each other.

Unfortunately, assumptions about students did not end with passive messages posted outside and inside teachers' classrooms. Once school was

in session, at the end of each day the student resource officer (SRO) came on the intercom and shouted, "All students not under the direct supervision of a teacher or coach must exit the building immediately!" It was usually repeated several times in a threatening way. He would come back on 15 or 20 minutes later and say it again. I wondered, when we heard the repeated message, a bit louder and a bit more forceful, if the SRO had just caught more kids loitering in the halls and felt vindicated by making his announcement again.

Previously, the community school secretary would make the announcement, but perhaps her voice was too kind and the kids didn't scramble out of the building like they did to the out-of-breath, barking voice that replaced it. It also used to be that they had a good 30 minutes or more before the announcement was made, but that changed to the SRO's coming on directly after the dismissal bell rang. I sometimes wondered if kids broke into a cold sweat at their lockers trying to get out of the hall before the SRO could catch them at 2:25.

It was here that I began to consider the dialogue of school, and whether posters and intercom messages directly influence the dialogues of teachers, students, and staff. Reflecting on the SRO's announcement, how it echoed off the walls of the school, made me angry. Mostly because this was not a dialogue at all. Much as with the posters in my colleagues' classrooms, students could not actively engage in a response to the SRO's commands. In fact, I knew that once they were delivered, the students were hunted down and barked at again for not complying. There were no exchanges between the SRO and students so that understanding might be found. Rather, the SRO grew indignant that they had not heeded his dictates.

I believe the school belongs just as much to the students as it does to the adults, if not more. I understand the importance of supervision and looking out for the well-being of students, but the way in which this message was delivered and acted upon troubled me. The authoritarian and antagonistic role of the SRO parallels the adult figures we see portrayed in John Hughes's films of the 1980s. Like Vice Principal Vernon of the *Breakfast Club* (Tanen, Hughes, & Hughes, 1985) and Principal Rooney of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (Hughes, Jacobson, & Hughes, 1986), the SRO refused to take any crap from the students he encountered and assumed the worst about all students he came into contact with in the hallways.

The difference is that in Hughes's films the kids have the upper hand and are victorious over those who work to control them. Rebellion for our students would be risky and might have severe consequences. In the eyes of the school's SRO, for a student to merely try to explain that she is going to her locker to get a forgotten textbook after a practice or a club meeting would be a sign of defiance. She should simply stay quiet and comply with

his demands. My concern is how this posits all adults in the building as authoritarian and antagonistic. It encourages the assumption that all students are up to no good and need to be controlled, and perhaps fosters the stereotypical adult-child relationships we see highlighted in Hughes's films.

This daily harangue worked as a constant reminder to students of their position in the school and adults' lack of interest in their needs and their reasoning for their actions. The tone and word choice did and always will anger me because I do not want to be identified with the message or the messenger. It angers me because I see the ways this 2-second message can hinder those of us who want to engage in dialogue with our students in our classrooms. Much like the poster about attitudes, this message can shut down students before they even enter my door. My observations of how the school "spoke" to the students made me realize that the talk was filled with assumptions and accusations, and it positioned students as powerless in that they had no voice. These conversations were noxious or directly confrontational, but the student was expected to simply comply.

These instances led me to wonder about the dialogue of school. I don't mean just the conversations we have in class with students. I wonder about the verbal and written messages we all hear and read each day in the school building. I wonder about the lasting effects this one-sided imparting of messages has on students and faculty members. How it affects our relationships with one another. How it positions each of us in an "us versus them" game of submission and control. Who "us" or "them" might be shifts according to who the message's intended audience might be. Though the receiver of this message may not be able to converse with the message's creator, a tension is developed. Receivers of the message interpret it according to their past experiences and respond in relation to those past experiences. One cannot converse with a poster or a squawking intercom, but the tensions such messages develop around relationships between student and the faculty or the faculty and the administration shape future interactions.

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate some of the ways we can move away from the squawking-box classroom and, instead, develop and foster a dialogical classroom. The chapter, however, will also explore some of the impediments to doing so with students who have been conditioned to exist within a space that does not necessarily value the voice that the dialogical classroom strives to elicit from each individual in the classroom. I focus this chapter on how I attempted to create a dialogical classroom over the course of a year. My intention is to illustrate the ways in which dialogue can be created and destroyed in a 10th-grade English language arts classroom using various texts and discussion protocols to foster a dialogical classroom. Much as in the opening observations, I also focus on a discussion around positions of power and difficult choices the dialogical classroom presents for

the teacher. I also consider the constraints—either the daily schedule or the demographics of the classroom—that can contribute to tensions.

DESCRIBING THE CONTEXT

I worked in a large and diverse suburban school just northeast of a large southern city. The area of the county in which I worked had a mixture of upscale subdivisions and multifamily housing, consisting of either townhomes or apartment buildings. The student population was representative of America's demographic makeup, with approximately 43% of the population being European American, 15% African American, 15% Hispanic, 12% Asian, 5% of mixed racial/ethnic background, and 10% unreported. Most students had been born in other parts of the country and had relocated to the area for the prospect of lower costs of living. At the time of the study, approximately 30% of the student population received free and reduced lunch.

A school filled with 3,700 students and 300 faculty and staff members will certainly create tension-filled dialogues, so no doubt the setting made me sensitive to monologic exchanges. Because relaying messages to large groups of people can be done easily through intercom announcements and posters, it makes sense that the school used these methods. Unfortunately, doing so also allows for the message to be conveyed without having to hear a response, positive or negative.

Through these means of mass communication, our students are shown again and again that we truly do not want to engage with them, that they should just listen and comply. At one point, I watched as two young men were chastised in the cafeteria for the way they were dressed. I heard one cafeteria staff member say to these two African American boys, "Even the special ed kids know how to keep their pants pulled up. Why can't you?" If they had attempted to defend themselves or even defend the special education students who also had been denigrated, they would have been seen as troublemakers. All they could do was tug at their waistbands and shrug the experience off.

Equally troubling was my silence. I was in shock from what I had witnessed, but beyond that, I felt I could not step in to defend the boys because it would undermine the cafeteria staff member. I was caught outside my classroom—where engaged dialogical practice was the norm—and fell into line with the expectation of the monologue of the school where authoritarian messages are given without room for retort.

This is one of the challenges for one who does engage in dialogical classrooms in a school that does not. In your dialogical classroom, students

can find their voice and express it. But then, what happens to those students when they leave the classroom with that voice? Or what happens to the teacher who uses her voice in a school or a system that may not want to hear it?

I do not understand how this antagonistic relationship has developed and why sharing ideas or even talking through ideas is seen as threatening. As educators, many of us are angry, but our responses sometimes come across much as the angst of teenagers explored in those John Hughes films. We complain among ourselves and rage against the policies, but too many of us are too terrified to actually act or insert our voice, and thus we empower those who are working to dismantle our profession. Sadly, it was not surprising to see this angst acted out in the faculty copy room of my school. I reflected:

> The messages we get as teachers in the copy room have come to really weigh me down. Someone has posted the steps the state is taking with the new evaluation system. This came out last year (2011), and it is presented as 14 frequently asked questions (FAQs) and bulleted points to answer these questions. Someone has written below, "14 reasons to retire early." Not far away hangs a political cartoon. In it the teacher is passing back papers and a student has his in his hand. The grade on the paper reads, "F" and the student has a dialogue bubble above his head. He asks the teacher whether she can risk giving out such bad grades since her pay is now tied to student success. He says something smart like he'd hate to see her lose her job or make less money.

Each of these examples shows the monologic nature of relationships within my school. My fear is that we have grown all too accustomed to the one-sided messages we post, give, and receive in our schools. My fear is the effect that such a relationship has on the transactions among faculty, staff, and students. What tensions might achieve more equilibrium if there were opportunities for all to enter into a dialogical relationship? Certainly, working to understand one another would reveal new tensions, but the hope is that through those tensions, addressed through dialogue, understanding can be achieved. Dialogue, however, has to be a two-way street.

I teach in a dialogical way because I feel that my voice cannot be the only one in the classroom. I am uncomfortable with the imposed monologic nature of the discourses of school. We, my students and I, must muddle through making meaning of texts in relation to our lives and the world around us so as to have a greater understanding of who we are and to feel that we are agents within our world. In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) writes,

> Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-students with students-teacher. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (p. 80)

When I walk the halls and observe how teachers speak to students or watch the news and hear how policymakers speak about and to teachers, I become frustrated. No one can grow in the current environment, and if anything, the message I feel we are passing along to students and teachers is that we do not really want them to grow, but to quietly comply.

LEANING TOWARD DIALOGICAL PRACTICE

I focus this chapter on one of my college preparatory 10th-grade classes. The school had three tracks for students. College preparatory was considered by many in the school to be the "lowest" track, but could be filled with a mix of abilities and levels of engagement. A student who is in the gifted program, but who behaves in apathetic ways toward school, might sit next to a student who reads at a 6th-grade level. The assumption of the district is that all students will be prepared to go to college upon graduation from high school. The minority groups in the school are also overrepresented in the college preparatory classes, which are largely made up of African American and Hispanic students and predominately males. White and female students find themselves in the minority in the college preparatory classroom.

For my 10th-graders, I develop our yearlong study of world literature around a single question: What does it means to be a citizen of the world? I feel that through the thematic connections of the texts, students will see a connection to themselves. We work our way through the ancient civilizations and into modern day, returning to the question again and again. While the anchor text may be from an ancient civilization, I try to pair it with various texts that get at similar themes and issues. The pairings of ancient with modern, I hope, helps my students to see connections between themselves and a text like *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Sandars, 1972) or an excerpt from the *Mahabharata* (Anonymous & Smith, 2009). In this way, we spend a year together in dialogue with one another and with the texts we read.

Unpacking a Wobble Moment

One day early in our year together, I brought in an excerpt from Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1991). Specifically, it was the chapter

titled "Those Who Don't." Below is an excerpt from my narrative on how I hoped the student would see how this text and others we discussed in class "talked" to one another in dialogue and thus provide us with a way to dialogue with one another. The day, however, did not go by without tension.

Oh, trying to get the dialogue going . . .

I have my 4th period divided up in groups and sitting in fours and threes around the room. We've been reading and writing about the question and how it applies to the various texts we've explored for the majority of the beginning weeks of school. I've started with Chimamanda Adichie's TED talk, "The Danger of a Single Story" and ended with JR's TED talk on how art can change the world. It is a Friday and we will play MLK [high school in football] away tonight.

We had a terrific discussion the day prior on JR's speech. The kids engaged with one another, came to a consensus on their ideas about the speech, and then shifted smoothly into a whole-class discussion like they'd been doing this with me for weeks. This had actually been our first attempt at group discussion. I had a student sitting on the top of the back of his seat, trying to get as in on the whole-class discussion as he physically could. Those who typically might sit silently and let others speak for them offered up their ideas. As the end of class came, the excitement of our discussion and what we'd just generated permeated the room and left smiles on most of our faces. I made sure to tell them how awesome they'd done and how well the discussion had gone.

Then came Friday. It just happened to be the very next day. Same groups. Same desks. Same kids. Different energy. I've got several who look as though they are ready to shut down and go back to bed. Two girls are arguing over something that has nothing to do with the text. The boy in the group ducked his head to stay clear of their dispute. I kept coming over to provide proximity control only to find that I was distracting the other group sitting by the bickering girls. I tried to refocus them all and moved away.

They were supposed to be examining a portion of *The House on Mango Street* called "Those Who Don't." Because the shifting of the text can sometimes be difficult, I asked students to consider some guided-reading questions. Our somewhat functional groups seemed to wonder what race the people in the text were. The guided question that led them there, I think, said something to the effect of "Whom is the narrator speaking about in the first paragraph?" Then the lines "all brown all around, we are safe" were referenced as evidence for their interpretations. I knew this would be the question at the heart of our discussion, so we shifted to a whole-class discussion.

We jumped into the question of race and the kids all had their reasons for thinking that the narrator was Black or Hispanic. Then I asked if the race

of the narrator really mattered and asked them to look at the last line of the text, "That's how it goes and goes." We discussed what they thought that meant and whether it was true. So far the whole-class discussion was going well. Someone suggested that perhaps the narrator was a hypocrite, since she seemed to criticize those who came into the neighborhood and passed judgment, but then she did the same passing of judgment in other neighborhoods. This is when my senior who is repeating the course and another White student at his group began to voice their opinions.

They seemed to feel that it was common sense when you go into a bad or dangerous neighborhood that you take certain precautions. Jeffery explained that he would put his wallet in his front pocket when he headed down to the game tonight against MLK. Jeffery is one of four White students in this class. I understood his intentions with this comment were perhaps harmless because I understood his perspective was shaped by the context in which he lived as a White young man from the suburbs; in his way of thinking, he was being cautious.

His explanation, however, didn't go over well with the rest of the group. No one really verbalized their discontent with what he was suggesting about Blacks and Hispanics in the inner city, and perhaps unintentionally about his Black and Hispanic classmates, but the feeling in the room shifted and conversations went to the tables or shut down all together.

As the White teacher, if I defend his statements or say anything that may sound like I'm aligning with his comments, I'll lose the rest of them. If I allow for a statement to be made and just let it hang there in the room, how will further discussions on sensitive topics go? If I allowed for the kids to press him on what he meant, how will that build community? If I press him, how will he feel entering the room again tomorrow? I don't recall what I said exactly, but I know I left with a feeling that I hadn't said what I could or what I wanted.

This incident illustrates how easily the dynamics of a classroom can shift from day to day and moment to moment. We had been moving right along and seemingly in concert with one another while we discussed the two TED talks, but when we moved to the excerpt from *The House on Mango Street* we had what my middle school band director would call a "train wreck." The impending crash was not easy for me to foresee, even with the two bickering girls in one group. I assumed we could move seamlessly into a whole-group discussion around the text, but that was exactly when things fell apart.

This is the challenge of the dialogical classroom. Students explore their voices, and in a diverse classroom, their voices are not always going to align with their classmates. It is easy for the teacher to jump in and take over the conversation and make the students sit and listen. At the beginning of

the year when students are formulating an opinion of how the classroom will operate and what kind of teacher you are, as a dialogical teacher it is dangerous to shift into that mode even if it may be easier. By doing so, I run the risk of perpetuating a system where the students are silenced, or perhaps worse yet, a system where they learn that in order to appeal to me, they just need to wait for me to state what I want them to say and then restate it to pass the class.

So I asked myself, was it that the students were butting up against the text, or the discussion? I attempt to connect their personal lives to the texts we read, helping them to see the personal in the academic so that the academic does not seem so abstract or cold or ancient. For the most part, students are engaged and discussing the assignment in their small groups. My desire to shift that to a whole-class discussion is where things become a bit more difficult and even tension filled.

When a different kind of dialogue intrudes or interrupts the dialogue that had taken place in small groups, tensions are created. It would seem that shifting toward a large-group discussion would be a natural movement in the dialogical classroom, but clearly on this particular day and setting they seem to conflict with one another. Within their individual groups, dialogue was successful, but when Jeffery shared with the whole class his interpretation of the text, classroom dialogue got more complex than perhaps the class and I were ready to handle.

Jeffery did what the assignment and what I had asked of him. He had related to the text in a personal way, even if his relating to the text positioned him as no different from the narrator whom the class had negatively labeled a hypocrite for calling out strangers passing judgment on her neighbors, but then passing similar judgment when she finds herself in a strange neighborhood. His understanding of why one might take certain precautions when going into a neighborhood different from one's own, or for him the football game later that night in an unfamiliar part of a major city, seemed to be defended by the text. For Jeffery, it was common sense to have a distrust of those you do not know or who do not appear to be like you or those you know.

We did not get the opportunity to consider his stance through self-examination. Since I did not feel that I had established enough of a foundation with this group at this point in the year, I feared pushing his statement further or challenging him. I had asked for volunteers and he answered my call; to turn the conversation into a possible attack on what he shared would have potentially shut Jeffery down for the remainder of the year.

I believe this decision highlights one of the concerns in a dialogical classroom. We have to wonder how much our identity as teacher, a position of power, sways dialogue, especially in difficult situations like the one this

narrative illustrates. Much like Ian and his questioning of his pushing of the four students after school over the caricature, I found myself in a difficult position. I wanted to continue more in my role as a facilitator, but feared that whatever I might have said would have only guided them to one resolution, and I was not happy about any possible resolution. I did not want to have Jeffery made out to be the outsider while the rest of us sat in judgment of his stance. I did not want to ignore his contribution to our discussion. Though it may have been off-putting to many, he was engaging in a dialogical way by bringing his experiences and ways of reading the world into his interpretation of the text. He was doing what I had asked.

It being Friday and our only having 55 minutes to work together, I had to leave the discussion where it was and hope that the weekend would put some space between us and what had taken place. I also hoped that the weekend would offer me insights on how to move forward with the group. One thing I did come to realize through this incident was that I did not necessarily have to be the voice that shifted talk or challenged it. I hoped that students would eventually take on that role through the course of the year, but if they did not, I had ways of bringing in challenging voices. In years past when I had students who took what might be seen as a challenging stance, perhaps one that was too narrow or even offensive, I used texts to work through it. Later in the year, I would have such an opportunity.

Unpacking a Second Wobble Moment

When we get into second semester, we typically read the memoir by three lost boys of Sudan titled *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky* (Deng, Deng, & Ajak, 2005). By the time we reach this text, students are fairly comfortable with various discussion protocols and most have found their voice in the classroom. The text is not easy for them to relate to, considering that they come from mostly secure homes in suburbia, and the three boys in the book face the perils of the bush and genocide.

We work at connecting to the boys through their experiences of coming of age and definitions of courage. This perspective helps students to see themselves in the lives of the Sudanese boys, Alepho, Benson, and Benjamin, but they really have nothing to draw on in regard to surviving impossible odds and being faced with losing all family and home. They read as outsiders, and while they work at sympathizing with the narratives, they cannot truly empathize. At the end of the book, we aim to work through some of the questions it has raised for us as readers who are fairly far removed from the lives of Alepho, Benson, and Benjamin.

Our inquiry usually begins during reading. We raise a number of questions at the end of various sections of the memoir and continue to add to

these questions as we finish the book. I have approached the ending in a number of ways each year that I have taught the book. There have been years when students select a question from our list of inquiries and explore it through a research project. I have had students trace motifs and themes we see come up again and again through the book. They then complete a visual representation of the motif or theme and analyze why this particular motif or theme was significant for their reading. During the year of our study, I chose to follow our finishing the book with a whole-class discussion. I thought I might take the class into a similar direction as in the previous years, but the discussion challenged me to rethink our unit of study.

When my 7th period finished reading *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky*, I asked them to develop discussion questions we would use for our final discussion of the text. I looked across their questions and narrowed them down to the ones I saw come up again and again. Many had asked questions that related to one another and some focused too narrowly on specific parts of the book, so I worked to make them broader.

Prior to our day of discussion, I gave the students the set of questions so they could consider five of them, develop their responses, and support those responses with evidence from the text. The day of the discussion, the desks were in the shape of a large oval around the edges of the trailer walls. I elected to use a protocol that allowed students much say in how long we would pursue one topic and when we would shift to another. We had used this protocol before and students had found it useful. I wanted the students to direct the discussion and have their voices be at the center. I chose a seat outside the oval. As I continued explaining in my narrative . . .

The question that got me wondering what our next step might be in our lesson was: What do you think America's role should be when these terrible things are happening around the world and innocent victims like children are suffering and dying? Students had varying points of view, but many echoed what had been shared before when we'd explored this question while reading the text. Some took an isolationist view, citing issues America had as a defense, others felt it wasn't the U.S. government's job to intervene and that it should focus on domestic issues, and a third cohort felt we needed to help those in need.

What troubled me was one student's response. He went so far as to say that "God helps those who help themselves." I tried desperately not to intervene; this was their discussion and I knew that if I were to step in, I would shut down all dialogue. I waited, hoping that someone would speak against these statements, but few people tried. Once God was brought into the

discussion, many sat and nodded. The student next to me gave affirmation to the student's comments by saying, "Yeah, that's true. It's in the Bible." They gave no specific examples for their arguments (except God's will) and that's when I knew I had to take the time to delve into the issues surrounding humanitarian action and foreign policy.

The tension here becomes a question of what really made me uncomfortable about the way this discussion was going and the student's comment. We all enter our classrooms with biases and agendas; sometimes those are very apparent and sometimes they are subtle. The tension developed in this dialogical process of discussion was based in my personal response to the question and the students' responses. My personal stance on the question and then hearing their responses raised a few hairs on the back of my neck. Had I interjected in the discussion, it would have curtailed the conversation and would have established me as the authoritative voice in the discussion, simultaneously squelching what I wanted in my dialogical classroom. I would be no different from the squawking voice demanding they leave the building each afternoon. Although it might have got my agenda across, it would have silenced portions of the room whose agendas did not align with my own.

I do not believe that we can or should disallow biases and agendas in all classrooms, but what the dialogical classroom offers is a way in which to have those agendas and biases voiced, while also listening to and understanding others. Whether a discussion or reading of a text shifts a student's point of view is not really the objective. I did not want to have students "see the light" in regard to their stance around this question. Instead, what made me most uncomfortable was their talking in generalizations and in ways that seemed uninformed or unexamined. I wanted them to have an informed opinion, even if it differed from my own. Knowing that I wanted to continue to work with this group in a dialogical way, I considered my options.

Looking for suggestions on resources, I turned to my media specialists and to the HEN Listserv, which is offered by a professional organization focused on genocide studies. I went to the databases available through our school's media center website and located articles arguing the opposing sides of humanitarian aid and foreign policy. I took this as an opportunity to engage in dialogue and to study persuasive argument.

Armed with all these new resources, we began the conversation on a new day by trying to define *empathy*, *sympathy*, and *apathy*. I did not want them to define the words within the context of a specific text, but just asked what they took the words to mean. They turned to partners and compared their responses. Then we talked as an entire class. I gave three students

dictionaries so that we could compare our working definitions with those in the dictionary. Students questioned whether or not one had to have experienced the same sort of thing in order to truly empathize with someone else. Many students felt that you did, but one student was adamant that you didn't. As he challenged other students' ideas, some began to say that perhaps they agreed with him. One student became upset that we weren't arriving at answers but only more questions. I smiled.

I wanted students to arrive at more questions than answers as we made our way through this inquiry. I smiled because I had students truly dialoging with one another over their definitions and their understanding of *empathy*, *apathy*, and *sympathy* instead of just nodding in agreement, as they had in our discussion of foreign policy. I knew the more they shared and questioned, the more they were reflecting on their understanding.

It was also significant to me that they were the ones raising the questions and providing the examples to support their definitions. I could have delivered the definitions and provided the examples for them, but this would have been a passive way to learn. Rather than call on a few students, receive their answers, and then move on to the next activity, I restated what students shared and asked what the whole group thought. As I did so, more hands went up and responses were shared. Students listened to what the people before them said and responded directly. It was not a discussion where everyone just reports out on his or her thoughts and we move on to the next person; we were making meaning together through our dialogue.

Keeping the definitions in mind and our construction of what we felt it meant to be sympathetic, empathetic, and apathetic, we read Virginia Satir's (2003) poem "Making Contact." I asked that they write what they believed Satir's point to be in the poem. We shared these and talked about the idea of being close to someone and what it might mean to be intimate in ways that were not sexual. The word *intimate* was part of one of the definitions we found in the dictionary.

Then we shifted to reading Azad Nafisi's (2005) This I Believe essay, "Mysterious Connections That Link Us Together." As we read, I asked that students make note of where our definitions and understandings of *empathy*, *sympathy*, and *apathy* were explored in her essay. She uses the word *curious* early in the essay and this was also a word that came up in our developing definitions of *empathy*, *sympathy*, and *apathy*. As we read, I completed a read aloud on the overhead, raising questions and making connections to our previous discussion, the reading of the text, and prior readings the students may have done either in our class or during their 9th-grade year. Finally, we ended with a writing assignment that asked students to reflect on the dialogue of the past few class sessions (see Appendix D).

Shifting from a topic that students had little understanding of, or personal connection with, toward an examination of personal response to texts allowed for us to move beyond the generalizations that came up in our discussion around foreign aid and humanitarian action. Rather than forcing them to find the personal in the academic, I attempted to have them clarify their personal understanding and then apply that understanding to academic texts. As we worked our way through our exploration, text complexity increased. As it did so, we moved away from first-person narratives into a silent film, persuasive speeches, and articles from databases arguing both sides of the issues on foreign aid and humanitarian action.

Our next move was to look closely at persuasive argument. We watched the 1989 Oscar-winning short film *Balance* (Lauenstein & Lauenstein, 1989) and discussed it. I brought in copies of Elie Wiesel's speech "The Perils of Indifference" (1999). Again we did a read aloud as a whole group to get started and students finished it for homework. Then we turned to articles. I used the jigsaw protocol to move students through a variety of articles, first on humanitarianism and then on foreign aid. Now, when they discussed the issues they did not make unsubstantiated references or claims but instead used the evidence within the texts for support. I think we continued to raise more questions than we arrived at answers. As a final assignment, they were asked to evaluate where they stood today and how the readings either reaffirmed or challenged their beliefs.

Did the choice of more deeply exploring foreign aid and humanitarian response take additional time that I had not originally factored in when planning our unit? Certainly. In an age when we are heavily influenced by mandates focused around new standards and when we lose more and more of our autonomy in the classroom, this choice may not seem an option at all to many. I could have easily walked away at what I thought would be the end of our unit, the discussion after finishing *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky,* and been disappointed that students relied on generalizations as a defense against difficult questions. I definitely had the pressure of the end of the semester looming over us and a fear that we were not going to cover all of what I originally intended to do.

If I had chosen just to move on and chalk it up to bad timing or lack of understanding on the part of students, I would have lost an opportunity. We still met the standards, probably more than I had originally planned. We also codeveloped a research project at the end of our exploration. The students felt that others needed to know as much as they did about issues of genocide, humanitarian action, and foreign aid. We planned and organized a project where they would present to peers once their further research was done. Students formed groups based on the topics and issues around what

had interested them most from our readings and discussions. We set up a museum-style presentation where their peers moved from exhibit to exhibit while my students shared their findings and answered questions around the artifacts they created.

What had begun as a passive and generalized whole-class discussion turned into a student-centered and student-directed project. They authentically engaged with the material they learned and then shared this knowledge with their peers. The last exhibit was a call to action in which the students provided their audience with ways to act in their communities in regard to refugee families.

Would this have taken place in a top-down, monologic classroom? Would my students have been so engaged with their inquiry and understanding that they would have wanted to share it with as many peers as possible had this not taken place in a dialogical classroom? Would I have been willing to negotiate valuable time so that they could put together a research project like they did in any other setting?

What I believe this wobble moment shows is that a dialogical classroom can achieve things that a monologic classroom cannot and can help students grow in ways no standardized test can. Students can become powerful agents of change by understanding what it means to not only ask questions about their world but also find answers to the questions they collaboratively create within the classroom community.

However, working dialogically takes time, observation, and flexibility. It does not happen easily. When students hear again and again that their voices do not matter or that we just want them to comply with our demands, getting them engaged in a classroom built around dialogical teaching principles can be difficult.

A call for dialogue is also a call for a redistribution of power. Dialogue requires that multiple voices might share in creating meaning, not just one directing students to meaning. It suggests that there might be multiple ways of viewing the world. It does not limit this multiplicity to just one correct answer that can be bubbled in on a Scantron.

Dialogue can also be messy. Opening up a classroom to dialogical teaching practices does not mean that all dialogue will be polite and cooperative; it can also engender frustration for students who become empowered in places that typically view them as powerless. For example, a student in my classroom will be accustomed to having the space to use her voice, to feeling empowered through dialogical processes. Once she leaves my room, the next classroom teacher may not teach from a dialogical stance and should the student insert her voice in this teacher's class, the student runs the risk of being seen as defiant.

A STANDARDS- AND DIALOGUE-DRIVEN CLASSROOM

If we model our classrooms and schools after the loud squawking intercom voice that demands that students follow directions without question or hesitation, we shut down possibilities for open dialogue. Although dialogical classrooms are tension-filled spaces, and not necessarily about everyone seeing eye to eye, they promote growth for both teacher and student. Indeed, the tensions are necessary for that growth to take place. Dialogical classrooms are not passive environments where information is poured into the chute of our students' minds. Dialogical classrooms are not authoritative spaces where all adopt the teacher's agenda and those who do not comply are silenced. Instead, dialogical classrooms are spaces where learners and teacher actively engage in individual and collective meaning making.

I realize the immense amount of pressure teachers face in schools to adapt to the ever-changing landscape of mandates and standards. It would be easier to be the squawking intercom voice and move through the standards without pause. The concern is what it takes away from ourselves as professionals and from our students as learners if we opt for the latter approach. My fear is that growth will not happen and we cannot achieve the interchangeable roles as "teacher-students and students-teacher" as Freire challenges us to live within.

Freire's (1970) observations about the power of dialogue on both the students and the teacher are significant. The reciprocal nature of being in dialogue with students and students being in dialogue with the teacher allows for both parties to become "jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (p. 80). We see great examples of this dynamic in the work of Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell (2008). In their in-school and out-of-school engagements with students, they illustrate, through example after example, how the roles of student and teacher become interchangeable.

In the current educational climate that we work in, those outside our classrooms—our department chairs, administrators, system superintendents, and policymakers—argue that teachers have a responsibility to ensure growth of our students through the standards. Standardized tests are created to show the growth of our students in relation to their mastery of the standards. In some cases and for many in the not so far off future, our pay will be tied to whether or not our students show growth on standardized testing from one year to the next. The double standard we work within is that we know our students and we will be held to these standards, but we also know that those standards are not enough.

The dialogical classroom, on the surface, may appear as just a place where dialogue occurs between students and teacher. It is a place that is much more than just that. The dialogical classroom may start as just dialogue among people, but to really achieve the true dialogical classroom, it must grow to dialogue with text, with systems, and with the world. In doing this, the student becomes more empowered and more knowledgeable about how she can use her voice. The dialogical classroom is structured around taking critical stances at not only what others say verbally but also what others say in text or in action. In this space, the student becomes more than just a student who has mastered a "standard."

Angela's Suggestions for Action

I believe teaching and learning to be vulnerable acts. Like each of the authors of this book, I have to be willing to be vulnerable in the presence of my students. I have to be willing to partake in the exercises and questions with which I am asking them to participate. It is in this tension that I find myself and my students in dialogue. It is uncomfortable for each of us at one point or another, but if I am not willing to enter this vulnerable space with them, our classroom becomes nothing more than the anecdotes about the squawking intercom or (un)inspirational posters plastered on the walls I have described in my chapter. It becomes monologic.

My call to action for other educators is to consider doing the following:

- Find time to be reflective about the tensions in the school and the classroom.
- Be prepared to be challenged in your assumptions about what is actually taking place in the classroom versus what you believe to be happening.
- Connect with a group of colleagues or at least one colleague who will push you in constructive ways as you explore these issues.
- Allow for the voices of differing perspectives to shape the dialogue of your classroom with your students; rely on the texts you bring in to create wobble.

Participating in a group such as ours helped me to look closely at what was and was not taking place, what I assumed and what was actual. For example, I needed my colleagues to push my views in places where I felt finding consensus was necessary in class discussions around particular texts. When I shared the work of my class regarding the excerpt from *A House on Mango Street*, the research team pushed me to question why consensus was what I was after and with whom I wanted the majority to agree. I had to consider carefully the voices of the research team and reflect on my intentions and purposes for developing a dialogic space with my students. Through our dialogue, my purpose for teaching in a dialogic way became more muddled and clear at the same time; it too was a tension-filled space.

As a secondary teacher, I find that it is easy to become isolated. We close our doors and we do our thing. Being in dialogue with students can teach us many things, but unless we bring in the voices of those outside our classroom to really help us examine it, I fear we risk becoming shortsighted and perhaps dogmatic. In conversation with Bob about having students take a

critical stance, he challenged me to consider why I might want students to do so. He questioned whether I wanted students to simply adopt my perspective or to be able to better articulate their own after close examination of all the voices presented in our studies. My intentions were with the latter option, but on reflection I wondered if my students felt that were true. It is through dialogue such as this that our practice improves.

Sharing stories from your classroom with colleagues from within and outside your school can bring fuzzy areas of your practice into sharper focus. Asking others to consider those stories in some systematic way will quickly move such storytelling beyond faculty lounge gripe sessions and into richer dialogue about the complexity of teaching.

There is also risk in attempting to ignore the power structures and the voice they attempt to insert. If anything, they must be brought in so that we may question them in critical ways. If we don't raise such questions, who will? How will our students raise such questions if we do not? I cannot take part in a classroom that ignores the structures negatively affecting my students. However, as teachers, we need to rein in our knee-jerk reaction to see as negative and problematic anything that comes from building or district administration. Instead, if we take a dialogical stance on our practices, then we need to pursue all opportunities for such dialogue. Just because the path to dialogue may seem steep or even difficult to perceive at all doesn't mean we shouldn't try. Ultimately, creating better dialogue with those outside our classrooms makes it easier for us to enrich the dialogue within.