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AN INTERPRETIVE EXERCISE IN MOVING FROM RESEARCH TO ASSESSMENT IN LANGUAGE ARTS

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Research on dialogic learning practices supports the use of dialogic contexts for language students, but actual teaching practice provides little evidence of corresponding assessments. In order to facilitate a qualitative research project on dialogic practices in language classes, I used audio-journals. This paper reports on an interpretive exercise, which came out of that research. In the interpretive exercise, I considered the strengths and challenges of using audio-journals in research. Furthermore, I contemplated the possibilities of using audio-journals in Language Arts instruction, to close in on the research gap regarding assessment of oral literacy.

Keywords: language learning; audio-journals; assessment

INTRODUCTION

With the click of a digit, we send photos, videos, and audio notes to each other. What if language teachers could use that ease of communication for assessments of oral literacies? In this paper, I report on an interpretive exercise, which evaluated the potentiality of using audio-journals as an assessment method in Language Arts classes. This exercise was the result of an analysis of the concept of audio-journals as a data collection method. I analyzed audio-journals in preparation for research within a secondary school. The purpose of that research was to understand students'

experiences of classroom talk. As I proceeded with the actual research, I noticed that there was little correlation between classroom talk and formal assessments. As a result of that observation, I devised a research question for this interpretive exercise: if audio-journals can yield meaningful data for research purposes, can they be used as an assessment method for literacy education?

CONTEXT

Teachers are often preoccupied with preparing students for pen and paper testing. However, the Alberta English Language Arts syllabus (2003)states, "oral language is the foundation of literacy" (p. 3). Students are expected to develop oral competencies, but there are no corresponding formal evaluations. What happens to a curriculum objective and student learning if there is no mandate to evaluate it? Research shows that dialogic learning practices, which bring orality into the classroom, are essential to Language Arts classrooms (Alexander, 2008; Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz, 2013). Students' cognitive abilities and social skills can be strengthened through dialogic learning practices which harness students' multi-literacies. Can and should these practices be evaluated? What can we learn from the use of audio-journals in research?

In this interpretive exercise, I wonder what curriculum can look like if instructors make small steps in these directions. Writing on higher education, Lang (2015) makes a case for the importance of small teaching steps to support students' learning. This is important for the secondary school language-learning context because that foundation sets a tone for what students think is required of them in higher education. Students may find themselves challenged to harness their multi-literacies and creativity, in post-secondary educational contexts or career opportunities. In the absence of opportunities to enact oral literacies through dialogic classroom practices, these challenges become more pronounced.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Dialogic approaches in educational practice share many common features, including open exchange of ideas, jointly undertaken inquiry, mastery of disciplinary knowledge and ways of reasoning, engagement with multiple voices and perspectives, and respectful classroom relations, but such contexts can be difficult to facilitate (Haneda, 2016). That difficulty often stems from the challenge in assessing dialogic exchanges. In online classroom environments, there is the greater potentiality to assess dialogic exchanges because of how speech acts can be contained in online classrooms. Simpson (2016) reports a successful implementation of dialogic teaching in an online classroom. In fluid face-to-face situations, that kind of assessment can be more difficult to implement.

There is a wide canon of research on dialogic learning practices, from Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), to more recent research (Alexander, 2008; Langer, 1992; Nystrand, 1997). These sources are essential readings for teachers attempting to include more classroom dialogue in their teaching practice. However, there is little research on ways to assess students' learning in these contexts. Furthermore, research on secondary school students' experiences of dialogic encounters in language classes tends to emphasize teachers' perspectives.

In my background research, which led to the use of audio-journals, I was curious about what students had to say about face-to-face dialogic learning contexts. Student voice theory was useful for that research because it argues for the opportunity to give students a sense of presence, power, and agency (Cook-Sather, 2006, pp. 3-5). I pursued research with audio-journals, from the theoretical perspectives on student voice work (Cook-Sather, 2006; Lensmire, 1998). The goal was to provide students with mediums to be heard. However, the research on audio-journals as qualitative inquiry was sparse.

METHODS

The research process for the interpretive exercise of this paper was a series of literature reviews. I conducted a critical evaluation of the use of diaries in research and I present some of my findings here (Blackman, 2016). Then I conducted a literature review of assessments of oral literacies. Here, I present preliminary conclusions on the use of audio-journals as a data collection method, to consider how they can inform oral literacy assessment in Language Arts.

Audio-journals in Research

I reviewed the use of audio-diaries in qualitative research and I considered the recurring recommendations and limitations of various forms of diaries as data collection methods (Crozier & Cassell, 2016; Day & Thatcher, 2009; Hewitt, 2015; Jacelon & Imperio, 2005; Kenten, 2010; Worth, 2009). I concluded that audio-journaling can strengthen research because: it can be participatory by empowering participants during the research process; it can minimize researcher interference in studies where participants' voices are key; it can be convenient, spontaneous, and versatile; it can provide self-reflective opportunities for participants; and it can provide research opportunities to access participants who are difficult to access otherwise, through distance or disability.

Audio-journaling has challenges: technological glitches and practicalities can be unpredictable; participants may need prompts or reminders to record; journals can produce too much data or conversely too little data; the researcher distance runs the risk of participants going off topic. I devised some counter-challenges: discuss the process with the participants prior to data collection; describe the data which is sought; practice a rehearsal; provide participants with prompts; use a check-in or follow up interview; use the journaling with other data collection methods. Based on my research with audio-journals where I collected nine submissions from three participants, I

concluded that these strengths and challenges were sound representations of audio-journals in the field. These strengths are opportunities for Language Arts instruction to address students' multi-literacies.

I sought to determine how this analysis could help understandings of assessments of oral literacies. From a literature review of assessments of multi-literacies (Kalantzis, Cope, & Harvey, 2010; Moni, van, K., & Baker, 2002; Whitehead, 2007; Wyatt-Smith, & Cumming, 2010), I concluded that there is a gap in research on assessment of oral competencies in Language Arts, because there is a gap in evidence. Not only is evidence of oral literacy sometimes challenging to find in research, evidence of assessments of oral literacies in Language Arts is sparse. Alternative assessments tend to reinforce reading and writing assessment objectives (Bauer, 1999; Kalantzis, Cope, & Harvey, 2010) and do not explicitly address multiliteracies. Audio-journals in research may yield insight regarding the possibilities for assessments of students' oral literacies.

Implications for Language Learning and Recommendations for Action

While I worked out the actual strengths and challenges of using the audio-journals in the field, I made field notes about the possibilities for using audio-journals in language instruction. In a digitally enhanced age, where students transmit voice notes with the click of a digit, and create vlogs with casual expertise, audio assessments are an underexplored tool in language learning contexts. In spite of the traditional challenges, dialogic practices in language learning could be strengthened if instructors make use of audio assessments. Such assessments could harness students' daily skills. These assessments can also be connected to future occupational prospects and even address the same skills evaluated by current standardized tests.

Instructors can create powerful learning for their students through the small everyday decisions, and assessments ought to be considered in those decisions (Lang, 2016, p. 243). Teaching and

assessments are always interrelated. Revolutions do not always begin in grand gestures. Cultures flow from small, almost invisible actions. Recognizing that our students are immersed in digitally enhanced contexts, recognizing the value of promoting dialogic exchanges, and conceding that formal assessments might not move at the pace in which people actually live, it is worth thinking of ways to introduce small gestures of alternative assessments. Audio-journals, not just as research tools, could be relevant in terms of assessing current language learning objectives. I am curious to see how instructors try out audio assessments in an action research manner, to determine the merit of my assertions.

This paper is conceptualized as a proposal, a dialogic engagement with instructors and students, for ongoing discussion, and subsequent research. Wolfe and Alexander (2008) emphasize that in dialogic interactions, individuals can be exposed to alternative perspectives and expected to engage with another person's point of view in ways that challenge and deepen their own conceptual understandings. Therefore, I invite correspondence on the query: what can audio-journals offer as assessment in Language Arts?

CONCLUSION

Audio-journals are sound research tools. They could be practical audio assessments which strengthen current language assessment, support language teaching, harness multiliteracies, and provide avenues of inclusion for differently-abled students. Experimenting intentionally with voice-notes, as snippets of content, knowledge, skills, or even as audio-journals, calls upon instructors to be more critical teachers. Critical teachers can benefit from harnessing the stance of critical teacher researchers who decide what needs to be learned and discovered in their classes, and how such learning is assessed (Steinberg, 2015, p. 5).

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