Naming the Author: Incorporating Theory into Classroom Practice

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by

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ABSTRACT

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Naming the author is a classroom practice that requires the teacher and students to refer to texts by the author’s name. Such a practice can be used in any classroom at any level in which a text is referenced. This thesis gathers and compares three articles related to naming the author, and concludes that naming the author can lead to more engaging classroom discussions. The author also suggests and reflects on possible ways to name the author in real classrooms.
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Names: Labels and Perceptions

What’s in a name? Shakespeare had a point when he pontificated on the meaningless nature of labels and titles. The language that we choose to attach to a particular concept will not change the concept’s inherent identity. A rose, by any other name, will still smell sweet, and it will still consist of petals, leaves, and a stem. Labels may not alter their subject, but they do influence our perceptions of that subject. Language molds our understanding of the world around us.

The classroom is no exception. We work hard to eliminate certain types of language from our classroom discourse: gender-specific, homophobic, racist, sexist, biased, or bigoted. The effects of these types of language on perceptions may vary, but with the climate of schools today, can hardly be disregarded. However, it is important to focus on other types of language and how they influence our classrooms.

As teachers of literature and writing, we are constantly referring to texts. We discuss Tennyson, argue about *Crime and Punishment*, cite Laurie Halse Anderson, and open our vocabulary workbooks to page 33. But how do we label these texts? What is the effect that our language has on text perceptions: students’ and our own? It is time to examine how our classroom language about text affects discussion.

Theories of Authority and Discussion

Text references in the English/LA classroom generally fall into two categories: reference to the author and reference to the object. When teachers and students recognize and identify the author of the text, they are naming the author. For example, a teacher might explain the use of point of view in James McBride’s memoir *The Color of Water*. 
“McBride gives us insight into his own experiences as well as his mother’s memories by alternating points of view.” The alternative is to disregard the authorship of the text, as teachers often do with content area textbooks or handbooks. “Answer the questions on your worksheet when you finish reading section four. It should have all the information you need.” The difference appears minor, but holds serious implications for classroom perceptions of text.

A classroom practice of naming the author results in a perception of the text as just one contributor to learning. Other contributors include the teacher and the students themselves. To understand this argument, it is necessary to be familiar with the concept of text as participant versus text as object. Elizabeth Buchter Bernhardt, in her article “The Text as a Participant in Instruction,” explains the difference. She says that when a text is treated as an object, it is “perceived as holding truths or facts” and viewed as an authority. Students must “reproduce the text” in discussion or on tests and quizzes (32). When text is treated as a participant, it is seen to “not contain truth per se, but raw material” which students use to construct their own personal interpretation of the text. Thus the text “participates in the construction of understanding” (33). When teachers and students name the author, they take the perspective that text is a participant, containing the written ideas of another individual. Those written ideas then become the “raw material” that is used to construct unique meaning.

When the author is not named, the text becomes the authority because the text is not recognized as the thoughts of another. The text is objectified, held above the students because it is not human and therefore not subject to human error. Any student ideas are
automatically devalued because of their lack of expertise. The text is the infallible expert, so there seems to be little need for novice student ideas and interpretations.

The differing perceptions of text as object/participant and text as authority/equal contributor leave imprints on classroom discourse. Michael W. Smith and William Connolly explore a similar set of opposed concepts in their research into the effects of the perceived authority of the teacher on discussions of poetry. In a systematic study, Connolly taught three poems at three different levels of authority. It was not the students’ perceived authority of the text that varied, it was their perceived authority of the teacher. The first poem to be taught was written by Connolly, which put him in a position of high authority. The second poem was one that Connolly had taught many times, giving him a level of moderate authority, and the third was new to both the students and Connolly: his authority was here very low, comparable to students’.

Findings included the effects of the three levels of authority on the type of discussion. The authors refer to Nystrand’s study on monologic and dialogic discussions, which differ in the level of equal involvement of all participants (271). A monologic discussion resembles a lecture format, with the teacher as the primary speaker, possessing and distributing knowledge. Dialogic conversations rely on participation from all students and the teacher as well, requiring the interaction and engagement of everyone. Connolly and Smith found that the high authority situation led to discussions that were less dialogic than the other two situations (280).

Specifically, discussion in a class where the teacher holds a low position of authority is more guided by student contributions (281), which are longer and less often directly prompted by the teacher (283). The parallels between a classroom overshadowed
by a perception of high teacher authority and a classroom controlled by a perception of authoritative text are many. In both situations, students are novices in the presence of an expert of some sort. The classroom is “an extremely slanted playing field” (qtd. in Smith and Connolly 273) where students feel that their fledging experiences can never measure up to the expertise of the teacher or the truth of the authoritative text. Although the source of perceived authority is the teacher, not text, the contrast between monologic and dialogic conversation exists in both authority situations.

As a result of the devaluing of unique student contributions to discussion in the presence of expert authority (whether it stems from text or teacher), students begin to measure their success as learners by simply regurgitating perceived truths. To a typical student, the objectified, authoritative text is the vault of all knowledge, so her comments can only be valuable if they mirror the text perfectly. This leads to information recitation. The goal is for the student to imitate their perception of the text, to spout factual truths. Because the truths are indisputable, there is no conversation. What is there to discuss? The truth exists in the text and is simply recited.

Alan Frager describes information recitation as gathering facts from the teacher and text of a class, and supplying it when prompted on an exam (18). Recitation goes hand in hand with monologic discussion. If there is a perceived authority in the form of an objectified text, students will obediently sit, receptive to the wisdom in the pages, and wait for the teacher to interpret the knowledge. Knowledge is “definite, known and expressed by someone else as information” (20).

Frager argues that the more engaging model of knowledge, the view that inspires student interaction, is the idea of grand conversations (20). He bases this argument on
the complexity of information. Some knowledge is relatively simple and finite, such as the color of a stop sign. But other knowledge, like the meaning of a Shakespearean sonnet, is more abstract. While reading the Act 1 prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* with ninth graders, I asked students to practice interpreting the language by paraphrasing each line. One student suggested that “from ancient grudge break to new mutiny” meant that Romeo and Juliet were going to shake up their family feud intentionally, while another thought that the family street violence was responsible for the “new mutiny.” Both had valid explanations and support, but the two interpretations differed. The “truth” is unclear because the knowledge is too abstract and complex.

If there is no truth, then the knowledge must take a different form. For Frager, the truths of this kind of knowledge lie in “understanding and making judgments about people’s experiences” (21). Knowledge does not exist as information alone; it exists as the intersection of information and judgment. Information must come from multiple sources to allow for adequate judgment, and texts provide abundant resources of information (22). It is then up to teachers to show students how to combine text viewpoints with other sources of information, such as themselves and their classmates. The next step is to create a personal interpretation of meaning from the collection of information (23). During the class discussion of Shakespeare’s prologue lines, students experienced a scaffolded version of create their personal meanings from the text. As students shared their paraphrasing of lines, the class worked together to create an overall interpretation of the prologue. As a unit, we modeled the process that individuals experience when they construct knowledge from conversation. Contributions from
multiple sources were considered and evaluated, then a final opinion of overall meaning was created.

In this way, grand conversations are dialogic discussions. Just as the student paraphrases of the lines, texts are simply one perspective on an idea. They must be woven with others to form a tapestry of student knowledge. An objectified text can never fill this role because it inherently cannot allow other versions of truth to exist. Texts that are not objectified, that are recognized as contributions to a discourse by an author (or authors), are participants in the grand conversation. Students are not intimidated. They are invited into the conversation, into the dialogue. Objectified texts lead to less participation in discussion, and texts perceived as participants encourage more participation, engagement, and interaction.

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**Classroom Practices**

So what about our classrooms? How can we translate these lofty theories and ideas into everyday practices that we can use in the midst of managing our classes: collecting makeup work, reporting attendance, and posting homework assignments?

The answer is simple but powerful. Name all authors in our classrooms. We begin by changing our own perceptions of text. We need to identify the authors of texts we cite during class, from the poetry anthologies to the literature textbooks and the YA novels to the grammar workbooks. Additionally, we must realize that these texts are the extensions of the ideas in the authors’ minds, not all-knowing wells of truth. We cannot create an environment that inspires student engagement in discussion unless we can perceive the texts as participants.

We as teachers can challenge ourselves to eliminate all text objectifying language from classroom vocabulary. The goal is to strike down “It says on page 41…” and drive out “What it’s talking about here is…” If we make the effort to refer to each author by name in class, students will follow suit. A few gentle reminders, or even a brief explanation of the theories involved, will nudge students along. Perceptions of text will begin to change. As students mature and grow, they will become aware of a new understanding of text and how it interacts with their own ideas.
Best of all, naming the author is a very manageable change to make in a daily classroom routine. There is no need to alter lesson plans, texts used, technology, or teaching style. If a teacher is discussing literature, she can name the author.

For example, while teaching in an eighth grade language arts classroom, I identified Cris Tovani by name when teaching a lesson about identifying voices as a reading strategy. I had just discovered the concept of naming the author in a methods class and wanted to try it out. After explaining that she wrote articles and books that I had read for my college classes, I introduced Tovani as the person who chose to use terms like reciting voice and distracting voice to explain the voices we hear in our heads when reading. As the lesson went on, I used phrases like “Mrs. Tovani explains…” and “Mrs. Tovani says…” to reemphasize the fact that we were discussing ideas that someone else had written down. The changes to my lesson plan were nearly non-existent, consisting of little more than a scribbled reminder to myself. I was able to incorporate the change with little stress or effort.

The benefits of the practice far outweigh the costs. In a lesson I taught on personification with eighth graders, using author names changed perceptions of poetry. Students saw poems as contributions made by individuals rather than pieces of writing with a specific correct meaning. After working together to create a definition of personification, we looked at Emily Dickinson’s poem “The Sky is Low” to see how the poet used personification. During the lesson, I referred to the poet as “Emily” or “Dickinson,” and a few of the students did so as well, although they often used the pronoun “she” instead of the poet’s name. In response to the poem, one student wrote
“Emily said things like the clouds are mean…” As a result, we were able to consider the role of Dickinson simply by making an effort to call her by name.

Another benefit of naming Dickinson was that students got a chance to talk about what poets are thinking when they write. I asked students why they thought that Emily chose to use personification in this poem. One student said that he thought that Emily used personification because she wanted to show how the weather was similar to human beings, and personification draws connections between inanimate objects and people. Other students raised their hands and added that she might have used personification because it made the poem more interesting, or because the personification added more specific detail. Without recognizing the poet as a person, students would not have been able to understand the usage of personification on such a deep level. This is because we would not have been able to talk about the way that the poet may have decided to use personification.

Other teachers have noticed student engagement with text when authors are named. After hearing about my interest in the concept of naming the author, one of my colleagues described her experiences with *Lord of the Flies* and her students in a freshman honors English class. While she said she made no special effort refer to the text as a product of the author, she explained that her students were interacting with the text as participant. “My students are arguing with Golding,” she said. “They are connecting ideas about his commentary on society with their own lives.” Without the perception that the text was a participant in the creation of personal knowledge, students would look to the text for the ultimate truths, not use it as raw material to create their own ideas.
In a climate of professional development, there is often pressure on teachers to demonstrate proof of growth as educators. Because naming the author is so easy to incorporate into what is already happening in the literature classroom, it can be a useful option for teachers to explore. Experimenting with naming the author can lead to benefits that offset the small amount of time and effort it will take. Naming the author instigates a chain of significant changes that lead to altered perceptions of text, highly valued student contributions, and more engaging classroom discussions.
Works Cited

