

**READING, WRITING, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SELF:  
THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF LITERACY  
THROUGH THE LENS OF DIALOGISM**

Judith Lysaker  
*Butler University*

**ABSTRACT.** Learning to read and write is often cast as a process whereby children master a particular set of cognitive and linguistic tasks. Yet when children emerge into literacy we see there is much more to it. In this paper, I use the lens of dialogism to account for the transformative experience of learning to read and write. Illustrated with a case example of an adolescent boy learning to read for the first time I offer an analysis of how both the dialogical construction of the intertextual self and dialogical action of the intertextual self may lead to self transformation. In particular I suggest that differences between oral and written language and the act of self representation in literacy events set up new dialogic relationships within the self that may explain how and why transformation occurs. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

“There is an intimate connection between the project of language and the project of selfhood: they both exist in order to mean” (Holquist, 1990)

Learning to read and write is often cast as a process whereby children master a particular set of preordained, sequentially organized cognitive and linguistic tasks. Yet when we watch children as they emerge into literacy we sense there is something more to it than the accumulation of skills. Our teaching conversations are steeped in personal accounts of the transformative experience of learning to read and write that lead us beyond the mastering of skills. These accounts are filled with emotion, energy and a sense of joy, and are not limited to our observations of the often delightful developmental changes typical of young children. Indeed, the accomplishment of literacy seems to transform the human person regardless of whether the reader is four years old, a first grader, or a 12 year child who has never been to school.

Our ideas about the transformative nature of learning to read and write are not based solely on our teaching stories. Language and curriculum theorists have considered the ways in which literacy affects the human person in different ways over time. Most importantly, perhaps is Rosenblatt's (1978) notion of the reader text transaction in which she emphasizes the active involvement of the reader in the meaning construction

**AUTHOR NOTE.** Please address all correspondence regarding this article to Prof. Judith Lysaker, Butler University, 4600 Sunset Avenue, Indianapolis, IN 46208, USA. Email: [jlysaker@butler.edu](mailto:jlysaker@butler.edu)

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process. In her work, *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem*, she makes the assertion that reading is an intense personal experience in which the reader is transformed during the reading event as a consequence of some merger of self and text that constitutes the transaction or 'the poem'. In a slightly different way, Grumet (1988), in her essay *Bodyreading*, also notices the transformative nature of the reading experience when she argues that reading is "fraught with danger" because one must give up one's self in the process of entering new worlds offered by the reading event.

Yet, despite our stories and these conceptual insights we have not found a way to account for *how and why* literacy is experienced as transformative. Understanding how and why reading and writing are transformative experiences of the human person seems important and may help us in several ways. Such an understanding may enable us to situate literacy learning in models of human development with more precision and greater import, refine and deepen our own models of literacy, shape theoretical models of reading and further enlighten our views on the capacities implicated in literacy difficulties.

My purpose in this paper is to account for the transforming experience of learning to read and write using the notion of the dialogic self. In order to do this, I first will make the assertion that reading and writing are foremost human activities and events of self. I will then use a model of the dialogic self to describe and analyze particularly transforming literacy events in the life of a young adolescent boy struggling to learn to read and write.

### **Why use dialogic models to understand literacy learning?**

Historically it has been difficult in literacy research to take into account the complexity of the human subject given its biological, psychological and social facets. In fact, Alexander and Fox (2004) comment on our predilection to create reading models that come from single disciplinary perspectives, that is, from physiological, psychological or sociocultural views which fragment human experience. The notion of the dialogic self suggests that self is a dynamic dialogue of many voices and that it performatively represents the whole person. Such a model of self allows us to reclaim the complexity of human experience by embracing the integration of the person in the first place, replacing a focus on the reader with a focus on the *being who reads*. Such a broadening affords the examination of reading as complex human activity of self, rather than cognitive activity, physiologic response or the instantiation of a cultural identity.

A second group of reasons for considering the use of a dialogic model of self to better understand the transformative nature of reading is that it defines self as conversation, and is therefore inherently tied to language, providing us with a conceptual link between what it means to be human and what it means to read and write.

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In this paper I have constructed a notion of dialogism that draws on literary, philosophic and psychological traditions in order to better understand what it means to read and write. In particular I draw on three interrelated assumptions. The first assumption of this view of dialogism is that human beings are meaning makers. This assumption comes out of the hermeneutic tradition and in particular Heidegger's (1953) conception of thrownness. Heidegger considered knowing the world to be an interpretive *condition* of being in the world. According to Heidegger we are "thrown" into a preexisting web of meaning, in which to be *is* to make sense of, to interpret, to understand the world. And so to exist is to be in a meaning making relation to the world and others.

The second assumption of my construction of dialogism is that to be human is to be in relation. While feminist approaches to epistemology (e.g. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986) are known for this perspective, relational perspectives on human development can also be found in child psychology and psychoanalytic traditions. For example, feminists from the psychoanalytic tradition like Chodorow (1989) remind us that primary relationship in our lives and the desires and other human emotions that accompany them are integral to the relationships we form. Winnicott (1971) suggests that relationships between children and mothers that are "good enough" create a potential space for cultural and aesthetic experience. That is to say that being in relation with a caring other makes it possible to experience the meaningful encounters with others and with the world. Thinking about self as relational thus affords greater attention to that which surrounds the being which is interpreting. The notion of potential space gives us a metaphorical location for the place in which self and other interpret each other's worlds and human yearnings. The image of 'entering the world of the other' is essential for my construction of dialogism because it describes the *relationship between the utterances* (Bakhtin, 1981) as 'worlds' that we inhabit, and in which we make sense of one another.

The third assumption that I use in this model of dialogism is that the activity of self which is located in this potential space or 'world' emerges through ongoing conversation primarily in the form of language. This language is not only produced for the purpose of expression but is constitutive of self. This is to say that consciousness itself is made up of an ensemble of dialogues within and between individuals (Lysaker & Lysaker, 2005). This notion of the multivocal quality of self grows out of the Russian literary tradition of Bakhtin (1981). It has been developed further by constructivist psychologists (Hermans, 1996) who assert that it is this dialogic or conversational quality that explains the fluidity of self, the changes that occur moment by moment as well as overtime within a self experienced as whole. Specifically, the view here is that the dynamic quality of self is made possible because the self is not a single thing. That is to say, we are not merely constructed through conversations we have with others, but are by nature constituted by conversations and that these conversations constitute

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consciousness. In this view, consistent with the works of Ricoeur (1991) and Kerby (1991) we are not only shaped by the influence of language upon us, we our selves are languaged events.

Thus taken together I propose a dialogical model of self which asserts that people are fundamentally interpretative beings, that our relationships and the emotions that surround them are essential for creating a space for aesthetic experience and that that metaphorical space is characterized by dialogue between and within the people from which we construct who we are.

### **Applications of dialogism to reading and writing: A case analysis**

The self does not know itself immediately but only indirectly through the detour of cultural signs of all sorts. (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 80)

Let's turn to how we might use this model to better understand the transformative nature of reading and writing. Can we begin with the thought that through reading and writing new voices enter into the conversations of the self? Is it useful to view reading and writing as voices which are a vital part of the ensembles of dialogues which comprise our consciousness? I would suggest that this is at least plausible. At this point we have arrived at a definition of the dialogic self which casts it as an interpretive event, constituted by meaning making systems in particular language and a performance of our embodied human state. Yet, the question remains, how exactly do learning to read and write enter as voices and how does that result in the transformation?

To address this question I will now draw on some examples of a larger study of a young adolescent boy learning to read. In particular, I will first present the background of the study, a description of the participant and then analyses of two examples of literacy learning, the first in writing and the second in reading. In these analyses I will seek to examine how the participant uses self representation to enter into a transformative dialogue with texts. It is not my goal in this analysis to explicitly explore self in terms of its contents pre and post literacy experience, nor to provide data on the personhood of the participant was prior to and following learning to read and write. Instead, I will focus on the transformative processes as they occurred, evaluating the usefulness of dialogism as a theoretical lens.

### **Background and Context**

Cody was a fourteen year old Caucasian boy from a rural Midwest background who entered school for the first time just after his fourteenth birthday. His late entrance into school was an artifact of his family's rural life style in which the children were home-schooled and helped to care for a small farm. I was called on to tutor Cody in reading and writing by the head administrator at this K-12 alternative school, who

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along with Cody's teachers felt that intensive tutoring in literacy was necessary for Cody to be successful.

Cody and I spent three hours every school day in a tutoring setting where I helped him learn to read and write. Informal assessments showed his literacy development to be similar to that of someone beginning first grade. He could write his name, read predictable books and read twenty-five sight words from a common list designed for kindergarten children (Clay, 1991). When asked to write Cody was extremely hesitant, writing only with significant prompting and using phonetic spelling. He drew a self portrait as part of our early assessments with reluctance and commented, "I don't know myself by sight very well." Teachers and administrators at the school remarked on his lack of maturity and of social skills, presumably related to his delayed entrance to formal schooling.

The discrepancy between Cody's chronologic age and his literacy development made his learning to read and write unique and interesting in many ways. Practically speaking for all of his childhood Cody did not employ literacy as a means of getting to know himself or his world. I hoped that this juxtaposition of literacy development and general development would make the use of literacy as a resource for self more pointed and more visible. As his tutor I felt that I was unusually poised to participate in and observe how his literacy emerged in relation to his development.

My approach to instruction was grounded in holistic practices for emergent and early literacy. I read aloud to Cody frequently, we wrote shared texts and participated in shared reading. Early in my work with Cody I used a modified interactive writing approach to help him to get his thoughts on paper. It is that writing that I wish to take up now to demonstrate the use of dialogism as a conceptual frame for understanding the transformative aspects of learning to read and write.

### **Dialogic analysis of the role of writing as transformative**

Our own existence cannot be separated from the account we give of ourselves. It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity (Ricoeur, 1985, p.214)

After a few weeks of building trust, Cody was no longer silent during our tutoring sessions and began to offer stories of his life at home. I responded to this by suggesting that Cody and I write together and used a "biopoem" structure to facilitate his writing. I explained the form of the biopoem and we spread a larger sheet of poster sized paper along the floor and got out markers. I coached Cody through the writing because he needed help finding the letters that matched the sounds of the words he wanted to write. At the beginning of each line I reminded him of the poem's structure and what was needed for that particular line.

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The following is Cody's biopoem:

Cody

Strange, nice, helpful, complicated  
Sibling of Seth, Haley, Jacob Annie Brett  
Lover of complicated puzzles, Scamper, computer games  
Who feels bored  
Who needs freedom, to be left alone, food  
Who fears being too high to jump off, oncoming traffic, snakes  
Who would like to see his mom get rid of the goats and the inside of a Porsche

Is this poem which is a written accounting of who Cody is, a resource for self construction and, therefore, a context for transformative? If so, in what ways is this piece of writing implicated in this process?

I would suggest that Cody indeed, following the descriptions of Ricoeur (1985, 1991) uses this biopoem in three ways which transform him by creating new dialogues which constitute his consciousness. First, within the biopoem is the act of producing the writing itself. This is interpretive action requiring dialogic activity. Cody must apprehend, recognize and make sense of some aspect of his being, some part of the conversation that constitutes his 'self' and represent that aspect of self in language. This activity allows Cody to know himself in a new ways. As Ricoeur (1991) explains, "The self does not know itself immediately but only indirectly through the detour of cultural signs of all sorts." (p.80). Thus through writing, Cody captures a moment of the ongoing conversation of voices that constitute who he is and places it visibly in the social world through writing, thereby setting up a new relation between the representation of self and the present lived experience of self.

Second, the poem which was posted in our classroom became a visible part of Cody's social world. He had daily opportunities to remember the process of its construction, reread it, recognize the names of his siblings, or wonder why he chose a particular word. These responsive actions, from attending to the meaning of the experience, to noticing a spelling pattern or recognizing a name, all constitute interpretations that become part of the continuing process of self-authorship.

Third, the presence of this self-representational text and the interpretations that it evoked provided contrasts for Cody. For example, Cody could read the first line of his bio-poem a week later and ask, "Why did I write 'strange,' I don't really think I'm strange." This reflection produces a difference between the representation of self in the writing, and the present. In accordance with Ricoeur's (1991) views Cody may be recognizing himself through the use of cultural signs more keenly because they represent him, pointing to who he is which is different than experiencing who he is. This is consistent with Bakhtin's (1991) notion that the presence of contrasting voices, the

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simultaneity of sameness and difference is a condition which provides opportunities for new interpretations of self. In other words Cody may be coming to better know himself by developing ever evolving interpretations of who he is in the new dialogue set up between lived experience and text. The quality of permanence that exists in the written text more readily allows for this kind of ongoing negotiation of self.

In sum, through these three ways the texts Cody and I produced, such as the biopoem, become the “other” that can be encountered through dialogue. In essence, extrapolating from this case study, when we learn to write perhaps we set up a new kind of dialogic relation with aspects of our selves. When we encounter the text we have produced we see ourselves not simply in the text, *but also in our present interpretation* of that text. Possibly, in self-representational texts like Cody’s biopoem, we reconfigure who we are through contrasts created between the self we are presently experiencing and the self we encounter in the text we have produced. Thus learning to write may be far more than a matter of learning skills. Beyond any issue of skills the act of writing by representing our selves in the world, may allow us to transform ourselves by setting in motion a new set of dialogues between the voices that constitute our consciousness.

### **A dialogical analysis of reading as transformative**

While writing may be a more obvious form of self representation and, therefore, a more visible example of self transformation, reading also involves dialogic encounters with self that lead to transformation. To explain this I will return to an example from my work with Cody.

When reading aloud with Cody I experienced him as being in another world, of being absorbed, of having what Gallas (1996) has called “the look” that occurs when readers are engaged in a story. The following description comes from my field notes and describes my experience of reading aloud to Cody during one of our tutoring sessions:

The book *Dealing with Dragons* (Wrede, 1992) is one I find easy and pleasant to read aloud, and I enjoy fantasy about a princess who really does not want to be a princess. Cody sits and listens, with the look of drifting off into some unknown place. I am hopeful that he is becoming “lost “ in the story.

I stop at one point and ask some questions to see if he really is with me in the sharing of this book. He is. But the reading experience does not seem to be primarily about the story. This reading aloud is an experience of sharing some world that is not readily identifiable by either of us, one we share in silence, one we retain in some private way. We have become part of a shared fictive reality, a reality of the imagination as it were. I read aloud for nearly an hour. We do not

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talk at all. Cody has pulled his sweatshirt over his head us looking now as if he has drawn himself into a completely private world.

How does a dialogic model of self help us to understand this reading event and the potential of self transformation that exists? To address this I wish to return to the idea of self-representation. While the act of self-representation is most obvious in writing, it occurs during the act of reading as well and makes more explicit the dialogic nature and, therefore, the transformative nature of the reading event. To understand reading as a self representational act I return to the notion that interpretation is a dialogic activity of self. As we saw in Cody's writing, an act of self-representation sets up a dialogic encounter between self and the representational object of self, or a dialogue with oneself.

In the reading of texts authored by others, however, a second dialogue is set in motion. A relation between the person reading and the perceived text also occurs during the interpretive act. Because as hermeneutic beings we cannot know without interpreting we never know text immediately but only through interpretation. The "I," the person who reads, apprehends the text of the author. In this moment, the person reading may bring to bear the dialogues of self with which to encounter the text. The reading event then could be conceptualized as the "simultaneous relation," the dialogic commingling of the voices of the self and the *reader's interpretations of the author's voices as represented in the text*. As Rosenblatt (1994) reminds us, "Recall that the text is more than paper and ink. The transaction is basically between the reader and *what he senses the words are pointing to*" (p. 21, emphasis added).

James' (1890/1902) distinction between 'I' and 'Me' in his classic work on the psychology of self may be useful here to think about different aspects of self which are in dialogue with one another yet remain distinct from one another. James considered the self to be made up of two central components the "I", self-as-knower, and the "Me", self-as-known. The writer or the self as knower is the 'I,' and the text produced, could function as the self that is known or "Me".

Using this language I would suggest that in reading possibly something similar may occur. In reading, the self as knower or the person reading may relate to text in a slightly more complicated way. The person reading, in apprehending the text, sets up a relation between self that reads and the interpretation that is "me & text." The notion that we exist as interpreting beings in constant dialogue with one another may help explain this. We cannot simply take up the text as an entity that is not first interpreted. Simply by being in dialogue with text we interpret. In this ways Dialogism may help us to explain the relation between the reading subject ("I") and the reading subject's interpretation of the text or 'I' in relation or dialogue with ("Me" + "text"). The interpretation is part "me" or what Rosenblatt calls the "compenetration" of a *reader* and a text. In this way the reader or some aspect of the person reading *becomes* the text.



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In practical terms this transformative event could be brought about through dialogue with the text is what occurs when a person reading identifies with a character. The person reading may “recognize” him or herself (the “Me”) in the interpretation of text. In addition when the person reading visualizes the setting or some aspect of the text, he or she may recognize some part of his or her dialogic world and re-image it in his or her interpretation of the author’s text. The person reading may thus possibly re-present him or herself in the text through the commingling of voices of reader and text creating a new transformed self system.

Applied to Cody, as he learned to read he may have appeared so internally focused because as he was attending to the details of the story and noticing those places that were familiar and where he could take up the dialogue, where the voices that constructed him could easily enter the conversation. In particular, Cody seemed to find places of connection occurring where the protagonist of the story struggled for independence. Perhaps this was pleasurable and absorbing not only because Cody was mastering a new skill but because immersion in these books were enhancing and deepening the conversations of his own consciousness. Moreover, emotion may have played a part in his absorption. His own yearnings for becoming independent may have lead to him being more open to the transformative experience itself. After all he was a 14 year old who had just left the family farm to come to school.

The fictive reality then, which Cody seemed to be experiencing, could be conceptualized as constructed by him through dialogic encounters between particular voices of the text world and particular voices of himself. The intricate commingling of the ensemble of dialogues that are Cody with a second, different set of voices that are the text, perhaps constituted a transformed Cody. As he read a fictive reality was created with which he entered into an interpretive and emotional dialogue. Within this reality the voices of the text became resources for evolving self construction.

Being able to enter a fictive reality is an act of immense trust. It involves a decision by the reader to let go of the here and now and join a new time and place, forge new relationships and make new connections. To merge one’s own sense of reality with textual reality is part of what Rosenblatt (1994) calls the transaction between the reader and the text, an event in which the self is reordered in light of the text. This journey into a fictive reality brings to mind the words of Grumet’s (1988), “It is a giving up of the world”—one’s own reality “in order to have the world”—the fictive reality. To become a part of fictive reality one must in some way represent oneself in that reality, to create an image of oneself that lives in the image of the book. As Jeffery Wilhelm’s (1996) student tells us in his book by the same title, to be a reader “You gotta be the book!”

In sum, using dialogism as a theoretic lens makes it possible to assert that learning to read intimately involves the act of self-representation in the text world,

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leading to the transformation of the person who reads. By placing the person who reads in the text world through interpretation, he or she may be able to encounter the 'otherness' of the text. These texts, unlike self-representational texts or the experiences of writing, are composed by another, the author, and are less closely aligned with the voices that constitute the reader. They accordingly may set up a contrast between 'self' and 'other'. That is, the relation between self and other (other being in this case the text) provides a struggle of contrasting voices which is necessary for self experience (Bakhtin, 1981). This encounter with the otherness of text engages the reader in dialogue with worlds that are simultaneously both the person who reads and not the person who reads. Such action opens the reader to the possibilities of renewal and revision of self through these interpretive encounters. Such opportunities are undoubtedly the reason some of us read to encounter the possibility for renewal or change. The notion of dialogism implies an "openness to transformation of the self system to a new state, resulting in developmental processes of emergence" (Hermans, 2001, p.11). Through dialogic relationships with the otherness of text we can appropriate many voices and meanings that were not at first our own and in this way experience self transformation.

### **Conclusions**

Learning to read and write has been widely observed to profoundly transform people in a manner that seems to move far beyond what might be the impact of learning new skills. This transformation though is not well understood. In this paper I have examined whether dialogical self theory can help us to better understand the ways in which literacy could transform the person who is learning to read and write. Through a dialogic analysis of autobiographical writing and of reading aloud in a single case I have explored the activity of self during literacy events focusing on the transformative actions of self representation. In these analyses I have suggested the possibility that the dialogues that constitute our consciousness are reshaped through the interpretative acts of self representation required by reading and writing. In this way I have attempted to refine and deepen how we might think about the nature of the reading transaction and what it means in terms of the development of the person to learn to read and write.

This may have important implications for broadening our awareness of how and why some children experience literacy learning difficulties, and for literacy theory in general. For one, it may be that there are barriers to literacy beyond cognitive, linguistic and socio-cultural challenges. Understanding reading and writing as activities of the self may suggest that relational capacities are important as well. If this is so then it seems appropriate that we rethink some instructional approaches to children experiencing literacy difficulty. It may be that it is important for some that we give more weight to the facilitation of caring relationships in the classroom, creating space for self development as a requisite for their literacy development rather than focusing primarily

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on skills. Possibly, if we nurture a relationship in which children develop a richer ensemble of dialogues we may co-construct with them the texts of self that are the resources necessary for meaningful interactions with the texts of their lives.

Finally there are limitations. The work presented here is a first step in exploring the significance of models of self in furthering our understanding of reading and writing. The discussion of the case example presented here merely hints at the potential for the use of dialogism as a set of ideas for illuminating the meaning of learning to read and write. Much more work is needed including future research and theory building that explores the roles that emotion plays in a dialogic view of literacy learning.

Lastly there is the danger of a verbocentric view of the significance of language in development across cultures. While in some parts of the world it seems clear that the accomplishment of literacy can be life changing, this doesn't in any way suggest that other transformative meaning making events help people to develop in less 'language'd yet profoundly meaningful ways.

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