Idiocultural Diversity in Small Groups: The Role of the Relational Framework in Collaborative

Learning

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Vygotskian theorists share the assumption that the structure of consciousness comes about through situated, goal-directed, tool-mediated engagement in social practices (Cole, 1996; Wertsch, 1991). This axiom implies that in order to understand mental functioning, researchers should analyze the context of development and the ways in which it provides problems, values, structures, tools, and implied trajectories for human action. Operating from this perspective, educational researchers have focused on a variety of "nested contexts" (Cazden, 1988, p. 198) to help account for the ways in which (1) school-aged children develop ways of thinking and (2) the primary contexts for development (home and community) prepare children for the primary context for assessment (school). Among the social practices and arenas that researchers have studied in order to account for why people think and act as they do in school are public policy (Brown, 1993), home and community literacy practices (Moll, this volume), disciplinary traditions (Applebee, 1996), instructional approaches (Hillocks, 1995), peer group culture (Dyson, this volume), gender groups (Sadker & Sadker, 1994), cultural discourse communities (Lee, 1993, this volume), school in relation to communities (Peshkin, 1978), whole classrooms (Jackson, 1968), and small groups within classrooms (Smagorinsky & Fly, 1993). By studying development in a variety of settings, researchers have documented the ways in which the contexts of human development provide channels for what Wertsch (1985) has called the social formation of mind.

Two key aspects of social settings and their influence on concept development are the related notions of prolepsis (Cole, 1996) and telos (Wertsch, 1996a, 1996b, this volume). Both refer to a social group's view of an optimal outcome for human development and the group's resultant efforts to promote that outcome within members of their community. Vygotsky (1987) used the term "higher mental functions" (p. 127) to describe the culturally sanctioned, ideal ways

of thinking that are valued and fostered within community settings. Wertsch (1985) argues that each activity setting is governed by implicit assumptions that "determine the selection of actions and their operational composition. The guiding and integrating force of these assumptions is what Leont'ev called the motive of an activity. . . . Among other things, the motive that is involved in a particular activity setting specifies what is to be maximized in that setting" (p. 212). With different motives obtaining in different settings and with different settings providing different problems to solve, people engage in context-specific social practices that lead to the development of community-based, localized higher mental functions (Tulviste, 1991) and that enable them to "live culturally" (Ingold, 1994, p. 330; cited in Moll, this volume).

Every setting, in this view, is governed by particular motives that provide coherence and direction for the human activity that takes place within it. Educators who are consciously aware of this assumption have tried to structure the physical, social, and instructional environments of schools and classrooms in order to direct students' development toward particular ends. With students' social futures in mind, schools privilege certain cultural tools, in particular speech, and reward specific ways of using and ordering them to encourage students to arrive at the optimal developmental destinations. Moll (1990) has argued that

from a Vygotskian perspective, a major role of schooling is to create social

contexts (zones of proximal development) for mastery of and conscious

awareness in the use of these cultural tools. It is by mastering these technologies

of representation and communication (Olson, 1986) that individuals acquire the

capacity, the means, for "higher-order" intellectual activity. Thus Vygotskian

theory posits a strong, dialectic connection between external (i.e., social and . . .

extracurricular) practical activity mediated by cultural tools, such as speech and writing, and individuals' intellectual activity. (p. 12)

Stated more simply, a Vygotskian perspective would hold that the social and physical organization of schooling implies and encourages an ideal student and, eventually, adult and citizen. The notion of what constitutes an ideal adult, however, is under dispute, viewed variously as one who is caring (Noddings, 1993), subversive (Postman & Weingartner, 1987), thoughtful (Brown, 1993), culturally literate (Hirsch, 1987), civic-minded (Stotsky, 1991), imaginative (Bogdan, 1992), democratic (Dewey, 1966), joyous (Newman, 1996), virtuous (Bennett, 1993), politically liberated (Freire, 1970), personally liberated (Montessori, 1964), self-motivated (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984), scientific (Piaget, 1952), skeptical (Foucault, 1972), reflective (Schon, 1991), free (Greene, 1988), domestic (Martin, 1995), inquiring (Dewey, 1960), and compassionate (Jesus Christ, n.d.)--to name just a few qualities that educators have identified over the years. We should stress that (1) each of these terms may be defined in ways different from the way intended by its advocate, (2) each of these theorists, while foregrounding one trait, endorses others as well, and (3) many of these different qualities of an ideal adult are compatible with one another. Each ideal endpoint can, however, suggest the need to promote specific frameworks for thinking and conceptions of human purpose and thus, for educators, engagement in different social and intellectual practices in school.

In this chapter we look at one effort, by co-author Cindy O'Donnell-Allen, to deliberately develop a social context in her high school English classes according to principles of progressive education (e.g., Dewey, 1966). We will briefly describe the overall context of instruction and the relationship between Cindy's goals and her instructional approach. We then describe the small group discussions that took place during one classroom episode when students interpreted

different characters from Shakespeare's Hamlet through the artistic medium of the body biography, a life-sized human outline that the groups would fill with images and words that represented their interpretation of their character. We see our work as being compatible with the kinds of collaborative communities of inquiry endorsed by Moll, Putney et al., and Wells elsewhere in this volume. (See Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998, in press, for more detailed accounts of the school and classroom context and some of the transcripts we discuss here and more thorough descriptions of our collaboration.)

Cindy shared Dewey's (1966) view that schooling should promote democratic communities, with the ideal citizen achieving independence of thought and the freedom to express it responsibly within the confines of the greater social good (see Wells, this volume). To encourage these qualities she set up her classroom so that students had input into the curriculum and classroom organization and had latitude in deciding how to act within the overall structure of the classroom. Students' needs and interests motivated much of their work, thus taking student production in different directions and necessitating flexibility in evaluation, including students' involvement in the development of assessment criteria. Students were therefore given a great deal of responsibility ordinarily assumed by teachers, with Cindy's goal being for them to identify and create paths to guide their social futures. She assumed that given freedom of choice, students would become empowered learners, set worthy goals, regulate their own progress, and share willingly with classmates, who, similarly liberated from adult-imposed school structures, would grow together as a community of learners. Through such action, she believed, students would develop a "continuing impulse to learn" (Oldfather & Dahl, 1994, p. 142), an ongoing intrinsic motivation to learn fostered by their self-directed engagement in the personal construction of meaning. Cindy thus consciously oversaw the creation of a classroom

environment that she believed would promote the development of both an immediate democratic community and long-term ways of thinking that would enable the students to become happy and productive members of society.

Ideally, the motive of the activity described by Wertsch (1985), if effectively established by a teacher through the classroom structure and processes, would override any other motives that students might have for their school experiences. The overall values and motives of a classroom environment, as identified and fostered by teachers, could then diminish disaffection, subversion, or other mindsets that might undermine the goals of community and student empowerment

In this chapter we question the power of any context to overcome all others for all students. Our analysis of the different processes engaged in by the small groups in Cindy's class suggests that, while promoting certain types of behavior, the social context of the classroom, no matter how conscientiously developed, lacks the power to determine action pervasively. Our analysis is based on our observation that, within the overall culture of the class, small groups form their own local cultures, or <u>idiocultures</u> (Fine, 1987), that operate within the larger social structure yet may be negotiated in ways that take a different direction from that suggested by the predominant motive of the setting. We consider how one aspect of an idioculture, what we call a <u>relational framework</u>, can contribute to social processes that may be at odds with the teacher's sense of prolepsis and that may cause social dynamics to veer in different directions than those suggested by the overall social context orchestrated by the teacher. We come to these conclusions after studying the "offstage" discussions of students (Scott, 1990, p. 4; cited in Finders, 1997, p. 10) as they talk beyond the confines of the formal floor as they work in small groups. Following this analysis we argue for a more complex view of social context that takes

into account not just the immediate environment of the classroom but the overlapping histories that students bring with them to each social encounter. (See Dyson and Gutierrez & Stone, this volume, for an account of the counter scripts that can develop in opposition to a teacher's official script.)

Instructional Context

The research took place in a large (1,662 students) two-year senior high school in the American Southwest that used a block schedule, with classes meeting on alternating days for 84 minutes. The block schedule fit well with Cindy's progressive emphasis, allowing extended time for discussion and response-centered activities. Instruction throughout the core academic departments in the rest of the school, however, tended to be reliant on teacher-dominated patterns of discourse designed to impart declarative, authoritative knowledge, thus situating Cindy's approach within a larger school context where instruction in core subject areas assumed each discipline to be organized around a traditional base of content that a teacher was responsible for transmitting to students. Her instruction more resembled that in non-core areas such as home economics and agriculture in which students chose their own projects and developed them under the teacher's guidance through what Wells (this volume) describes as collaborative, dialogic inquiry (see Smagorinsky, 1995, 1996 for more detailed accounts of these non-core classes).

Cindy typically organized instruction around themes intended to allow students to connect their own experiences to literature. In the unit on Identity that opened the year, for instance, students responded to literature in response logs, which served as the basis for small group discussions, which in turn provided the material for whole class discussions. Occasionally students used their response logs as the impetus for collaborative artistic interpretations of literature. Students also kept writer's notebooks in which they recorded personal writing related

to the unit theme, usually in the exploratory manner that Wertsch (this volume) associates with the expressivist intellectual tradition in Western thought. Eventually they could take entries from either their response logs or their writer's notebooks and develop them into polished pieces that they would include in the portfolios that constituted their semester exam. Under Cindy's guidance students generated the criteria for assessing the portfolios. Her approach provided a thematic structure within which students were allowed choice regarding the work that Cindy would assess and the standards by which she would assess it.

The episode we focus on in this chapter took place in February, about a month into the second semester of the year. Following an in-class reading of Hamlet, Cindy had students organize into five small groups. Each group chose a central character in Hamlet (Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius, Ophelia, or Laertes) to interpret through the construction of a body biography, a life-sized human outline that students filled with art and words that represented their understanding of the character (Underwood, 1987; see Appendix A). We tape recorded four of the five groups as they composed their body biographies, and we then analyzed the transcripts. The whole coding system described both the social processes that structured students' discussions and the context, text, and intertext that provided them with both constraints and substance through which to produce their interpretations (see Putney et al., this volume, for a related discussion). In this chapter we will focus only on one aspect of the social processes, what we call the relational framework that they established, and discuss how it contributed to the idiocultures that developed within two groups that contrasted sharply with one another. The idiocultures that developed within one of the groups was highly compatible with Cindy's motive of developing a democratic community within the classroom; yet the other group illustrates how a relational framework can develop that undermines a teacher's efforts to encourage a social

future characterized by equity and common cause. In this chapter we will describe the ways in which the same overal instructional context, and thus the same social channels for development, may be negotiated in different ways by different groups of participants. The subversion we see in this group is different from that described by Gutierrez and Stone (this volume), who describe students' resistance to a teacher who limits their use of their cultural capital in classroom tasks. Cindy, in contrast, designed her class in ways that she believed would enable and motivate students to engage with the literature, the interpretive task, and one another in ways that contributed to their development as responsible members of a community of inquiry.

Social Frameworks within Groups

We next review the codes that helped us identify the relational framework that each group formed and that subsequently guided its interactions. We found that within the classroom, each group operated within both <u>imposed constraints</u> and <u>negotiated constraints</u>, each following from and in part a consequence of the <u>intercontext</u> (Floriani, 1993; Putney et al., this volume) or shared social practices that had taken place in Cindy's class during the school year. Imposed constraints described such structures as the assignment, the time limits within which the students worked, and the availability of materials, and provided the general impetus, direction, and tools for their joint activity. The imposed constraints compelled them to produce a body biography by a certain date (which Cindy extended at the end of the first block class).

More germane to the idea of a relational framework were the negotiated constraints that students developed to structure their interaction as they worked. These relationships varied considerably from group to group and had different consequences for both the equity of contribution within the groups and in some cases the appearance of the group product that

resulted from their effort. We next describe the codes that enabled us to make inferences about the relational framework of the group work.

We found that, across groups, social process codes fell into three areas: those that were productive (i.e., that contributed to the body biography production), constructive (i.e., that promoted social cohesion), and destructive (i.e., that undermined social cohesion). We describe the constructive and destructive codes next because they were the key codes in determining the relational framework. In addition we describe talk that was off-task and seemingly a consequence of the degree of cohesiveness within a group.

Social Process--Constructive

Affirmation: These statements affirmed the worth of another group member's contribution. They were more than simple statements of agreement; instead, they praised another group member's contribution and, by implication, the contributor as well.

Inclusion: These statements invited other students to participate in the project. Most often they were offered to more quiet, less assertive students in order to give them roles and opportunities to contribute.

Courtesy: These statements conveyed considerateness toward another student, often in the form of a routine civility.

Social Process--Destructive

Discourtesy: These statements conveyed a lack of consideration for another student and often were insulting or demeaning.

Resistance to Discourtesy: These statements occurred when, following a discourteous statement, a student would demonstrate resistance to the affront.

Apathy: These statements explicitly stated a lack of engagement with or motive for school work

Off-Task

Off-task statements were unrelated to the academic task and usually involved discussions of out-of-school events from the students' lives that did not inform their body biography production in any way. Although we looked for ways to intepret off-task statements so that they contributed in some way to the producation of the body biography, we found instead that off-task talk was primarily initiated and engaged in by students who made statements we coded as socially destructive. While not itself descructive for the most part, the off-task talk tended to detract from, rather than contribute to, the students' engagement with the literature and production of their intepretive text.

Relational Framework

We next describe the relational frameworks that each group negotiated. Table 1 describes the frequency of each code with each member of each group. Group One had relationships characterized by (1) the presence of constructive statements, (2) the absence of destructive statements, and (3) relatively few off-task statements. Group Two had relationships characterized by (1) the presence of destructive statements, (2) low incidences of constructive statements, and (3) relatively frequent off-task statements.

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Group One

The coding system helped us to identify the constructive processes appearing in the discussion of Group One. Group One interpreted the character of Ophelia (see Figure 1) and included four girls: Carly, Sherri, Ann, and Maggie (who was absent for much of the discussion). None of the girls was a member of any stable social group within the class. Sherri, one of two African American students in the class, had moved into town from another state at the semester break and had not developed any friendships that we observed. Ann, a quiet student whose grades fluctuated, had transferred into Cindy's class at the semester break and also did not appear to have settled into a social group. Carly had been in Cindy's class all year and was highly active in school government. In spite of possessing exceptional personal and leadership skills (she was both the school's Homecoming Queen and president of its Student Congress in her senior year), she did not socialize with a particular group within this class or outside it. Maggie was an older student who had dropped out of school the previous year and then re-enrolled, only to drop out again due to pregnancy shortly after the Hamlet unit ended; her absence during much of the body biography production was typical of her attendance for much of the year. As a whole, the girls had virtually no shared history and were not members of established social groups within the class. They worked together because the assignment required a group effort, not because they shared interests or experiences with one another.

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The students in this group established a relational framework that was characterized by their self-assessments (primarily through self-deprecating comments), their affirmation of one another's worth, and their efforts at inclusion. These interactions often appeared in a pattern: One

girl would provide a negative self-assessment and another would immediately respond with a statement of affirmation. In addition to this type of exchange, students would make statements of inclusion designed to involve one another in the project and would make statements of courtesy that promoted social cohesion.   Such interactions contributed to a relational framework that allowed them to work in a highly supportive and constructive way.

The relational framework was negotiated early in the group's collaboration. As noted, the girls were not well acquainted with one another. The beginning of their transcript revealed that their initial conversation served both to initiate their work on the assignment and to develop a relational framework that promoted an emotionally safe environment. The following exchange took place shortly after they began working. Ann had lain down to be traced and worried that her fingers appeared to be fat because the outline had inflated their appearance, a concern expressed by several girls in the groups whose discussions we analyzed:

Ann: Oh, not bad--okay, we could go over it with like the marker and   make it look a little thinner.

Sherri: Your fingers are not that fat, so don't worry.

Carly: It is like, oh, finger exercises. Okay, let's--was she wearing a dress?

        That might be easier, oh, she was wearing the dress, then we'll just put on a dress.

Ann: Yeah, because they went like tight here and then they just, like all   the way down.

Carly: Do you want to do that?

Sherri: Yeah, weren't you saying you were just going to do bare feet?

Carly: Yeah, we'll do bare feet, okay.

Ann: You wanna trace your sketch?

Carly: Okay, is it okay if I go ahead and, like, do the dress?

Ann: Yeah.

Carly: You sure?

Ann: Yeah.

Carly: Any of you guys want to do it?

Sherri: No, it doesn't matter.

Ann: I wouldn't know where to begin.

This excerpt illustrates patterns that recurred often during their collaboration. Ann's self-deprecating remark about the size of her fingers was immediately met with an affirmation from Sherri and Carly's humorous effort to dissipate her anxiety. The group then began to discuss how to represent their character on the body biography. The issue of representation was quickly superceded by the girls' efforts to identify the roles each would take in the interpretation. Carly tried to include the others in the production, only taking a role for herself after offering it to the others. Her effort at inclusion was met with Ann's self-deprecating remark about her ability to provide a good drawing, following which they began a discussion of how to depict the character's literal appearance in the play and film.

This initial exchange helped the group set up an egalitarian way of working together. The girls attempted to sort out their roles and relationships but did so through offering roles rather than assuming them. From the very beginning, then, the girls worked not only at negotiating an interpretation of the play but at negotiating a relational framework that allowed them to work together cohesively and supportively.

A second characteristic we identified that contributed to their relational framework was in the progression of their analysis and interpretation of the play. Initially they discussed literal aspects of the Ophelia, enabling them to talk about a topic that engendered agreement rather than conflict. During the first 125 of the total 754 coded statements in the transcript, they relied on the Zeffirelli film shown in class for their sense of how the character would look. Of the first 125 statements in the transcript, 25 (20%) were coded as referring to the film; in the remaining 629 statements, only 11 (2%) statements received this code. In addition, the first 125 statements included 21 (17%) statements coded as being a description of the character in either the play or their body biography, with description codes appearing in 80 of the remaining 629 (13%) statements in the transcript. In contrast, the first 125 statements included 11 (9%) statements coded as either a symbol or interpretation while the remaining 629 statements included 132 (21%) such statements.

Taken together, these figures suggest that their initial emphasis contributed to the development of a supportive relational framework because it focused on topics about which there was little disagreement. The following excerpt illustrates the literal focus of their discussion.

Carly: Okay, how does that, how did the dress, it came in and goes--

Ann: It goes down right below the boobs and then they just--

Carly: Is that the waist thing?

Ann: It's not even the waist, right here and then it just--

Carly: Is it like here, you think?

Ann: Up.

Carly: Up here?

Ann: Yeah.

Carly: Okay.

Ann: Your shoulders are a little higher.

Carly: We'll figure it out, we'll redecorate me.

Ann: We'll fix our hair in perfection.

Carly: Yeah, thank God for an eraser. Okay so here's, let me just kind of, it came

to right about here or something?

Ann: Yeah, they came all the way down.

Carly: God, I really need some knee pads and I'll be ready for this. Okay,

        I'll just have to--I'll redo this part and make it tighter, but it's a   wavy

dress. Can you tell?

Ann: It's supposed to be.

Carly: Good, I really don't know how, I'm not like a fashion designer at   all. So

if you guys have any input on this just let me know.

Ann: Looks good to me.

Carly: Should we give her hair?

Ann: Yeah, her hair was long, wasn't it?

Sherri: Yeah.

Carly: And it was kind of wavy?

Sherri: Yeah, that's her hair, but she always used to have it in a pony tail.

Ann: Or wrapped up.

This segment illustrates both their literal focus and their continued use of self-deprecation,

affirmation, and role offering as ways to enable them to cohere. The discussion of the cinematic

character's appearance allowed them to begin their discussion with high levels of agreement and accord.

In the remainder of the discussion, the girls turned to the more abstract problem of how to interpret the character through symbols.   One such exchange took place toward the end of the first block period and concerned their symbolic depiction of Ophelia's relationship with her father:

Carly: What are we going to put for her to obey her dad?

Ann: I don't know, we need some kind of symbol.

Carly: Maybe in her hair.

Ann: We could put something and then have like "Listen to dad"--

Carly: See, we could put on her hair, instead of actually drawing hair, we could

write "Dad" in like the curves, do you know what I am   saying?

Ann: Yeah, I think so.

Sherri: Okay, but we can't draw it in back of her, she's like--

Ann: We could put like "Listens to dad, obeys dad, dad died," et cetera.

Carly: Yeah, Dad slash Hamlet.

Ann: We could like list all of the things that made her go crazy in her   hair.

Carly: Okay, yeah! That's awesome! Good idea, okay.

Ann: Okay, but I don't think I'm going to turn that into a coffin.

Carly: Okay, that's good because that would be--I'm sorry if I put my butt in your

face--I'll draw it in her hair.

Ann: And her hair has to be brown, too, that's what color her hair was.

Carly: Okay, can I, with chunks of black, like one letter being black or

something. Okay, I'm going to, is it okay if I write a   song in here?

Sherri: Uh huh.

Carly: Okay, where is her first song? What does she say first? She says

something really interesting first. Where's the, no, okay, maybe   not.

Should I just put all of her songs because they're not very long   and they all

say something interesting? Or should I put that--?

This excerpt illustrates both the kinds of interpretation that the group came up with and

the continued maintenance of the social relations that enabled them to produce it. As the

discussion and Figure 1 reveal, they used Ophelia's hair as the vehicle through which to convey

verbal symbols about her situation. In doing so they continued with the same courtesies and

affirmations that they established early on in their discussion.

On the whole, then, the relational framework established by this group realized Cindy's

ideal notion of how students would perform within the parameters of a progressive pedagogy:

Within the overall confines of the required reading of Hamlet and the guidelines of the body

biography assignment, the students chose a character to interpret, engaged in exploratory

discussion as a vehicle for coming to agreement on how to understand the character and depict

her artistically, and treated one another with respect and appreciation. We see this group as

illustrating the potential for how students negotiate the open-ended structure provided by a

progressive pedagogy, in particular the kinds of productive and cohesive social relations that

they can establish in this context. (For additional perspectives on the uses of exploratory or

expressivist speech, see chapters in this volume by Ball, Putney et al., Wells, and Wertsch.)

Group Two

Group Two interpreted the character of Gertrude (see Figure 2) and included five students: Rita, Jack, Dirk, James, and Bob. Jack provided the axis for the group's social relations. Jack was tall, forceful, and talkative, often overpowering other students in the group socially with abusive statements delivered with a chuckle. He directed most of his derogatory comments to Rita, the only girl in the group, and Dirk, the only African American. Rita, who had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder for which she took Ritilin and was assisted academically by a resource teacher, was task-oriented and grade-conscious and was the impetus for most academic work within the group. Her need for structure and explicit direction often put her at odds with Cindy's open-ended instruction. She frequently made self-deprecating remarks both during this assignment and at other points during the year, being particularly worried about being fat in spite of standing 5'-2" and weighing 105 pounds. She also revealed insecurity about her appearance in general in spite of being described as attractive by several people interviewed for the study. Rather than being met with affirmations following these remarks, she instead made herself vulnerable to the taunting of Jack. Of the other three students, Dirk served as the foil to Jack's abusive humor, James was largely ignored, and Bob worked quietly on the fringes when present. Like Group 1, this group included students who were not members of any stable social group within the class; instead, they collaborated because the task required a group project. The group also included a preponderance of students who received poor grades in school: Jack passed Cindy's class with the lowest possible passing grade, Dirk was the only student who failed, and James dropped out of school in the spring after learning that he would not graduate. Rita had received poor grades before being prescribed Ritilin and working on developing study habits with her resource teacher, but improved dramatically at that point in all

classes. Bob was a member of the school's small neo-Sixties counterculture, earning C's in spite of Cindy's belief in his potential for higher achievement.

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The group's relations were established early in their discussion. Rita served as the figure for their body biography, and after a girl from a neighboring group had finished tracing her outline, the following exchange took place:

Rita: Don't smell of my breath whatever you do.

Jack: You already ate one bag [of chips] a minute ago. Rita, you're a pig.

That's why we had to size down your thighs. We had to do a little

constructive surgery.

Rita: My crotch is not that low.

Jack: No, that is a pretty low crotch. Do you want me to fix that for you?

Dirk: Well, what are we supposed to do--draw you buck naked or

something?

Jack: No, Dirk, please.

Dirk: I'm pretty sure--

Jack: Don't go there, man.

Dirk: We'll just draw some lines like she had clothes on and that is why   her

crotch is so low.

Jack: All right, tell me how high, Rita, like up in there?

Rita: That's good, I don't care what it looks like.

Jack: It's a good thing.

Dirk: We'll draw the chi-chi's now.

James: Man, that is, that is weird.

Rita: No boobs. (Laughter) I don't have any, and no, you're not going to draw any.

Dirk: She lookin'--

Jack: Yeah, she looks--we can reconstruct, but we can't reconstruct that   much.

This early exchange illustrates processes that took place frequently during their discussion. Rita served as the subject of various insults, primarily from Jack. Jack's abusive remarks toward Rita in this excerpt were central to a relational framework that discouraged collaboration and cohesion. On the fringes of these discussions stood James, whose contributions were minimal and rarely acknowledged by the others, and Bob, who was task-oriented when present but largely absent from the discussion. The relational framework developed by this group did not support Cindy's intention to have the body biography serve as a vehicle for a cooperative interpretation of the character or a democratic community of learners.

In addition to feeding on Rita's insecurities about her appearance, Jack's comments toward Dirk were at times blatantly racist. In the following segment Dirk made a reference to a black marker he was using for his contribution to the body biography, and Jack insulted him in a series of affronts:

Jack: What's up, Bucky?

Dirk   I had black.

Jack: What's so great about black? Black stinks.

Dirk: You got a point? Huh? I smell good. What're you talking about?

Jack: You smell so good--if you took a bath.

Dirk: I was going to mention that I found some markers in the drawer.

Jack: Hey, what are you doing, son?

Dirk: Same thing you're doing, son.

Jack: Well, now what are you doing? You're just messing everything up.

Dirk: Come on now.

Jack: Just take your black marker and get away from me, man. You hear

me, boy?

This segment needs little explanation, other than to say that it illustrates the destructive

relationships that Jack initiated within the group. These relationships were unanticipated in

Cindy's design of the activity and reveal the ways in which negotiations that take place within a

general classroom context are not necessarily as productive as are often assumed in accounts of

progressive classrooms (see, e.g., Atwell, 1987).

A second problem that affected the relational framework of this group was the varying

degrees of commitment that the different students brought to the class and ultimately to this task.

As noted, two of the five students did not pass the class and one passed with the lowest possible

grade, though each was given abundant opportunities and incentives to perform. These degrees

of commitment resulted in widely varying efforts to contribute to the group effort. One key

episode in the small group discussion came early when the students were discussing the time

frame Cindy had provided to complete the body biographies. At the time of the excerpt that

follows, the students believed that they had one block period, plus time outside class including

the ensuing weekend, to finish their interpretation. Cindy also made her room available before

and after school and during Overtime, a thirty-minute period adjacent to lunch when students

could go to teachers for extra help. In considering how they would need time outside class, the group interacted as follows:

> Rita: You guys, we're not coming in for Overtime--I'll do some of this   over
>
> the weekend.
>
> Jack: Rita's like--sacrifice. We're not coming in. You're right, I ain't   coming
>
> in.
>
> Rita: She should have given us like two periods to do this in.
>
> James: Shoot, I can't do this, I gotta work.

In discussing this segment during our data analysis, we came up with the image of a balloon that is punctured, releasing all pressure inside: When Rita declared that she would work on the body biography at home, the other group members lost all urgency in contributing equally to the project. From this point on, the transcript became characterized by Rita's efforts to initiate an interpretation and, for the most part, the other group members drifting off into unrelated conversations about the film Forrest Gump, an upcoming car wash sponsored by the cheerleaders, the impending state basketball tournament, the merits of different brands of shoes, their preferences in snack foods, and other topics. Roughly one-third of the group's discussion concerned these topics without relating to the body biography production in any way we could identify. We looked for ways to interpret their off-task conversation as contributing to the social relations or intellectual work of the group but could not distinguish it from casual conversation that might take place in any informal setting.

We present one final excerpt from their discussion, recorded when Rita brought in the body biography she had completed over the weekend. Here Rita explained the decisions she'd made to the other group members:

Jack: Where's our little writing that goes around her?

Rita: I know, I haven't done that yet.

Jack: Rita, what are you thinking? What did you do, blow it off again?

Rita: Well, I've got it written down. I just--

Dirk: I see, you closed in the hip a little bit.

Rita: Yeah.

Jack: Oh, the king, the king of hearts.

Rita: Guys, does it look crappy?--I mean is it okay?

Jack: The king of hearts. Pretty sweet. I think it looks pretty sweet,   Rita.
You did well. Did your little sister help you?

Rita: The reason why I crossed her fingers is because, is because I

        thought that I was going to explain that. I think she's real, she's

        crossing her fingers because she's hoping that everything will work

        out between everybody.

Jack: Did your little sister help you?

Rita: No, I did it last night.

Jack: You done good, Rita.

Rita: It looks kind of stupid but--

Jack: You done plum good.

Rita: I didn't know what to draw down here. I was like--damn, now   what
do I draw? So, I just--

Jack: So, the Queen. Q for queen, right?

Rita: Yeah--

> Jack: And here she is.
>
> Rita: I drew some hair because my body kind of looked like it needed it.
>
> Jack: That's what I thought--I thought she should have hair.
>
> James: Besides, they didn't have chemotherapy back then.
>
> Dirk: So she's crying because of Ophelia? Ophelia was killed.
>
> Rita: I don't know, she's kind of confused.
>
> Jack: She's crying because Rita said she was crying.

This excerpt illustrates the processes that we found consistently throughout this group's discussion. Rita conceived and executed the bulk of the interpretation, her insights about the play providing the substance of their body biography. Jack, though showing some appreciation for Rita's efforts (for which he would receive credit), balanced his praise with discourtesies. James made a single contribution, an attempt at humor that went unacknowledged. Rita worried about her elaborate depiction being "crappy" and looking "stupid." And Jack explained the character's tears as a decision of Rita's that needed no further discussion.

Discussion

In this chapter we have illustrated the contruct we have called the relational framework of a group's interaction. We see this construct as helping to complicate the notion of an instructional context. Educational writers have often described the creation of a healthy social climate as a vehicle for promoting productive social relationships (e.g., Graves, 1983). The case of Group 1 reported in this chapter reveals that, with the right configuration of students, this optimism may be well founded (see also the case study reported in Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998). The dynamics taking place within Group 2, however, shows that with different

sets of students, the social relationships that are negotiated can be counterproductive and establish a motive for the activity that is incongruous with that envisioned by the teacher.

Group 2 illustrates the way in which some aspects of the teacher's overriding motive may be realized in ways that mask the dynamics that produce them. Simply looking at the completed body biographies of these two groups, a viewer might assume that the groups' interactions were equally fruitful. For this particular task, then, Cindy's goal of having each group produce a compelling and meaningful body biography was achieved. However, her goal of developing a democratic classroom community was unevenly realized across groups; of the four transcripts analyzed for the study as a whole, two were characterized by cohesiveness and two by discourtesy or apathy. We see, then, the ways in which a teacher's effort to envision an ideal citizen and structure a classroom to facilitate students' development toward that end can be reconstructed by students whose past experiences have helped them form goals for schooling that are different from the teacher's. When these incompatible goals do not include the regard of school work as a means of personal development, then the establishment of an open-ended, polydirectional instructional context provides a setting for students to act in ways that are counterproductive to the teacher's goals for the class (cf. Finders, 1997; Lensmire, 1994; Lewis, 1997). One final excerpt from Group 2's discussion illustrates this point well. The students had been discussing the role of a medallion in their body biography, thinking of how it might work sybolically. Cindy circulated past their group and checked on their progress:

Cindy: You guys need to include more things?--Have you gone down this list of
all the stuff? Have you talked about that?

Dirk: We're doing it. Now on this medallion here, can we just like--what you
want us to do with it? Do you want us to put like--

James: Can we draw a face on there?

Dirk: A face or can we put a name or what?

Jack: Let's put a face. I'll draw a face.

Cindy: It's up to you. You are you artists. You are the bosses.

Dirk: Yeah, but you're the teacher.

Jack: Yeah, but you're the grade giver.

Even in late February, after six months of Cindy's systematic efforts to get the students to see themselves as meaning-makers and to view their work as a vehicle for personal development, they interpreted this task as primarily teacher-pleasing.

We see, then, the need to conceive of social contexts in terms of the deeper histories that comprise them. The image of nested contexts runs the danger of being viewed as two-dimensional; that is, we can see how a small group is part of a class, which is part of a school, which is part of a community, with the contexts radiating outward. A third dimension, however, enables us to view the cultural and historical backgrounds that contribute to each context and thus see the ways in which they can be negotiated outside the framework provided by the nesting. The idiocultural diversity illustrated by these two groups in a single class, then, provides a view of classrooms and their subgroups as infinitely complex and dynamic and difficult to predict from knowledge of the context alone. Rather than being deterministic, as John-Steiner and Meehan (this volume) say is often believed of Vygotskian sociocultural views of development, this perspective leaves room for a social setting to be negotiated and meaning to be constructed by its participants to suit their own ends, for good it ill.

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Appendix A: The Body Biography Assignment

For your chosen character, your group will be creating a <u>body biography</u>--a visual and written portrait illustrating several aspects of the character's life within the play.

You have many possibilities for filling up your giant sheet of paper. I have listed several, but please feel free to come up with your own creations. As always, the choices you make should be based on the text, for you will be verbally explaining (and thus, in a sense, defending) them at a showing of your work. Above all, your choices should be creative, analytical, and accurate. After completing this portrait, you will participate in a showing in which you will present your masterpiece to the class. This showing should accomplish these objectives. It should:

- review significant events, choices, and changes involving your character

- communicate to us the full essence of your character by emphasizing the traits that make her/him who s/he is

- promote discussion of your character, (esp. regarding gender issues in the play)

<u>Body Biography Requirements</u>

Although I expect your biography to contain additional dimensions, your portrait <u>must</u> contain:

- a review of significant happenings in the play

- visual symbols

- an original text

- your character's three most important lines from the play

<u>Body Biography Suggestions</u>

1. Placement - Carefully choose the placement of your text and artwork. For example, the area where your character's heart would be might be appropriate for illustrating the important relationships within his or her life.

2. Spine -Actors often discuss a character's spine. This is her/his objective within the play. What is the most important goal for your character? What drives her/his thoughts and actions? This is her/his spine. How can you illustrate it?

3. Virtues & Vices - What are your character's most admirable qualities? Her/his worst? How can you make us visualize them?

4. Color -Colors are often symbolic. What color(s) do you most associate with your character? Why? How can you effectively work these colors into your presentation?

5. Symbols -What objects can you associate with your character that illustrate her/his essence? Are there objects mentioned within the play itself that you could use? If not, choose objects that especially seem to correspond with the character.

6. Formula Poems - These are fast, but effective, recipes for producing a text because they are designed to reveal a lot about a character. (See the additional handouts I gave you for directions and examples)

7. Mirror, Mirror,.. - Consider both how your character appears to others on the surface and what you know about the character's inner self. Do these images clash or correspond? What does this tell you about the character?

8. Changes -How has your character chanced within the play? Trace these chances within your text and/or artwork.

Table 1

	Constructive			Destructive		Off-Task
	Affirmation	Inclusion	Courtesy	Discourtesy	Resistance to Discourtesy	
Group #1						
Carly	13	17	10	0	0	3
Sherri	2	0	2	0	0	0
Ann	3	0	2	0	0	4
Maggie	0	0	0	0	0	1
Group #1: Total	18	17	14	0	0	8
Group #2						
Rita	0	0	2	0	3	83
Jack	6	0	1	28	0	116
Dirk	1	0	1	2	10	68
James	1	0	0	0	0	40
Bob	0	0	0	0	0	8
Group #2: Total	8	0	4	30	13	315

Author Note