IS THAT NOT WHAT YOU WANT?

Conflicting ideals in dialogic interaction and rhetorical nonfiction writing for real purposes in school

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Abstract

The article explores how the ideals of dialogic teaching and writing for real-life purposes can conflict in practice. To this end, the article focuses on dialogic interactions between the teacher and students in a 5th-grade writing classroom where writing is approached as something anchored in real-life situations. Drawing on positioning theory, I unpack these interactions, observing how basic teaching ideals seem to intersect and create tensions that challenge not only students but also the teacher. Such teaching ideals include a desire to a) be sincerely dialogical and appreciative of students' perspectives, b) support and qualify students' rhetorical reflections concerning constituents of the specific situation, and c) create engagement by anchoring writing in real purposes outside the classroom. The article points to how the real life to which students must relate as writers can be both limiting and eye-opening.

Keywords: dialogic teaching, positioning, authentic writing, rhetoric, educational design

1.   INTRODUCTION

In this article I examine the role reality plays in both students' approach to writing and their teachers' supervision of that endeavour. I further explore the rhetorical reflection in which students engage when writing nonfiction at school, more specifically in situations where they are explicitly invited to interact dialogically and to tackle reality in their writing. For the purpose of this article I draw on an intervention where texts were aimed at actual readers outside the classroom, focusing on the dialogic interactions that occurred and how the real-world situation constrained them.

Although structured dialogic teaching is known to positively affect students' learning (Alexander, 2019; Skidmore & Murakami, 2016; Resnick et al., 2015), what precisely makes such discourse productive has yet to be conceptualized and characterized. Moreover, dialogic discourse is uncommon in classrooms, especially at elementary schools (Bundsgaard, 2011; Smidt, 2010; Sawyer, 2008). However, studies indicate that students enjoy writing nonfiction for actual purposes and that having students share their texts with real readers outside the classroom can be beneficial (Jones, 2015; Gambrell et al., 2011). Such an approach also appears to support critical thinking and reflection (Gambrell et al., 2011). Finally, in 2007 Purcell-Gates et al. conducted a longitudinal comparative study focused on 3rd-grade writing instruction, finding that instruction involving students in writing for real-life purposes holds far more potential than instruction encompassing explicit explanation of genre function and features in writing the same kind of text. These findings indicate that anchoring student writing in real-world situations and dialogic discourse shows great promise.

To further explore this promise, I therefore ask:

> What role does anchoring student writing in real-world situations play in two dialogic interactions between teachers and students? Additionally, how does tying writing to the real world impact the educational objectives of positioning students in a multi-voiced dialogic interaction, and how does it support rhetorical reflection?

Drawing on two examples of dialogic interactions between a teacher and students, I seek to demonstrate not only the potentials but also the challenges in dialogic interaction associated with basing student writing on real-world situations. I do this by exploring how the positions during student–teacher dialogic interaction are actualized. I find that tying writing to the real world indeed supports the representation of writing as a social action and makes the ensuing constraints visible. However, I also see that these self-same real-world constraints may serve to control the dialogic interaction in ways that might disengage students and limit the extent to which differences and voices can be explored.

2.   DIALOGUE AND NEW RETHORIC

In recent years, not least in the Nordic countries, education researchers have found inspiration in the works of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, for whom dialogue is a recurring principle. He argues that, as humans, we live in a world filled with others' words and voices. As we navigate our everyday lives, we think, speak and create in continuous dialogue with those words and voices: 'Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110).

Dialogue is thus a fundamental principle that shapes our experiences, understanding, and personal development. As the Bakhtin-inspired American education researcher Martin Nystrand claims, an exposure to different and competing voices—with one voice 'refracting' another—and the tension thereby created between them will enhance our creative understanding (Nystrand, 1997, p. 12).

A Norwegian education researcher, Olga Dysthe, has worked with Bakhtin's and Nystrand's perspective on dialogue. In her studies she refers to Bakhtin's concept of dialogue as a fundamental quality of human interaction to which our societies should aspire, also through dialogic teaching and discourse done in the classroom via explicit verbal dialogic interaction between the teacher and students and amongst students themselves (Dysthe, 1996, 2003). However, not all classroom conversation constitutes a constructive dialogic interaction, she argues. For this reason, she has developed the *multivoiced* classroom concept, a specific form of dialogic interaction comprised of diverse voices including the viewpoints and perspectives of various students with different backgrounds and values.

According to Dysthe, the teacher plays a crucial role in establishing this multivoiced dialogic interaction. She underpins this claim with Bakhtin's idea of the dialogic as something entailing seeing ourselves through the eyes of others and their voices (Dysthe, 1996, p. 416). As one of these 'others', a teacher needs to validate students as thinkers by encouraging them to ask *authentic questions* (open-ended questions without conclusive answers) to which they can attach themselves.

Bakhtin also emphasizes the fundamental dialogue underlying writing. One of his key concepts is *dialogism* (Bakhtin, 1995, 2009). Understanding dialogism requires an understanding that Bakhtin sees the *sphere of communication* as determining how a person will address a topic (in thinking, speaking, and writing). He maintains that every utterance is shaped by this sphere and its embedded variables, such as the topic, earlier utterances associated with the topic, the intention, and the addressees, including their possible understandings of and reactions to the utterance. For example, a person engaged in writing is in dialogue with these variables, seizing them and making choices with them in mind. Thus, the imagined reader permeates a writer's utterance, as do the writer's ideas about the reader's *realm of understanding* and possible responses to a specific utterance.

In Norwegian practice-oriented research on writing instruction, this dialogism as well as the positioning of agents in the sphere of communication has received considerable attention. In particular, dialogism has informed the development of functional writing approaches that emphasize the sphere of communication and purpose of writing. For instance, the Wheel of Writing (Berge et al., 2016) is a tool focused on the social acts and functions of writing. Also, the education researcher Sigmund Ongstad developed a triad model (Ongstad, 2004, p. 100; Smidt, 2010, p. 24) that illustrates how a student writer will position him- or herself in relation to a text's content or topic, form, function, and intention under the influence of familiar voices that relate to these aspects in different ways. The triad model has since been developed further and used to instruct teachers in how to approach the teaching of writing (Smidt, 2013, p. 36).

Figure 1. The FFF triangle, made as a tool for teachers in their supervision of student writers (my translation).
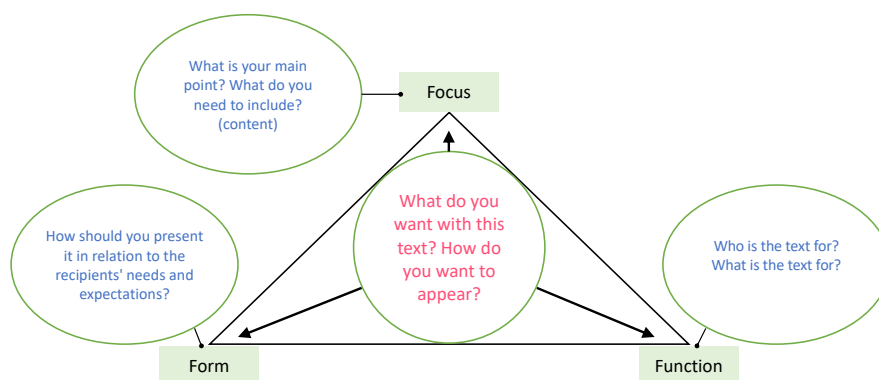
However, this dialogical and functional approach also reflects ideas from new rhetoricians who see focusing on the underlying situation as crucial to the development of writing awareness (Bitzer, 1968; Miller, 1984; Flower, 1994).

In 1968 rhetorician Loyd Bitzer introduced an influential model of the rhetorical situation, which he defined as something that ''needs and invites discourse capable of participating with [sic] situation and thereby altering its reality; (6) discourse is rhetorical insofar as it functions (or seeks to function) as a fitting response to a situation that needs and invites it'' (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6).

Bitzer also defined a rhetorical situation as having three essential constituents that give the situation its distinctive rhetorical character and invite certain rhetorical responses (Bitzer, 1968, pp. 12–13):

- *Exigence*: an imperfection or obstacle that calls for rhetorical discourse
- *The audience*: those who are influenced by the rhetorical discourse in order to make change

- *Constraints*: factors whose influence constrains the rhetor and his or her choices, including relations, people, events, facts, or even the rhetor's own beliefs and personal character.

The rhetorical product, as Bitzer sees it, is a response to a situation (containing the above three constituents). As a certain mediator of change, this product serves to change the thoughts or actions of its audience. Bringing about change depends on one's participating in the situation or, as I would express it, one's interacting with the rhetorical situation by reflecting on its components.

Rhetoricians Robert Vatz (1973) and Carolyn Miller (1984) criticized Bitzer's perspective on the rhetorical situation for its failure to address the socially situated constructions of rhetorical situations, contending that Bitzer's definition of a rhetorical situation is deterministic because it overlooks the rhetor's situatedness. Unlike Bitzer, Miller argues that situations are social constructs that result not from 'perception' but from 'definition' (Miller, 1984, p. 156). When identifying a situation and its constituents and then defining its exigence, people are influenced by the culture and ruling discourses determining how to define and respond to a situation, including whether to define it as rhetorical. Consequently, any constituents related to a situation are also subject to interpretation. As such, defining a situation and its exigence discursively serves to regulate what kinds of texts come into existence as responses to events occurring in society. This, she argued, makes writing a social action.

Like Miller, rhetorician and education researcher Linda Flower has approached writing as a social action and writers as rhetorical agents, emphasizing that reading the situation and negotiating meaning are key to gaining literacy:

> In this rhetorical tradition, the basic, foundational skills in learning to be literate are the skills one needs to read a situation; to plan, organize and revise; to build and negotiate meaning; to use and adapt conventions; and to figure out what new discourses expect and how to enter them. (Flower, 1994, p. 27)

Flower problematizes the ruling practices in school whereby students often perform what she terms *knowledge-driven writing*, which is done for the sole purpose of demonstrating their knowledge ('to say something') by simply writing whatever comes to mind. In contrast, she underscores the need to make room for action-driven writing ('to do something'). She argues that *collaborative planning*, a process where writers inquire into each other's writing choices, can help position the student as a writer doing something. Indeed, as she puts it, such planning can support making thinking visible (Flower, 1994, p. 149).

The new rhetoric and the concept of dialogism have led Nordic education researchers to look more closely at the student's positioning. Both Jon Smidt (2002) and Vibeke Hetmar (2017, 2019) have argued that in design processes for educational purposes positioning should be considered a central didactic category—an object of substantial attention—along with categories such as goals, content, and learning activities (Hetmar, 2019). As positioning is not just implied in an assignment but is also an ongoing event, it is also worth considering its importance in the oral

classroom. Students have several paths towards writing, and how a teacher communicates generally and about writing specifically in the classroom can enact them as writers in specific ways.

That said, Hetmar (2017, 2019) also stresses that actualizing specific positionings in the classroom can be—and often is—challenging because the school's culturally inherited forms of communication, which are rooted in an asymmetric teacher– student relationship, mean that the dialogic interaction between students and teacher may actualize unintended positionings. In line with this stance, Kvistad and Otnes also point to the difficulties of implementing multivoiced dialogic interaction. For example, in one study where students were asked to write a friend, their communal discourse clashed with the teacher's expectations regarding discipline (Kvistad & Otnes, 2019).

In my PhD project (Molbæk, 2019), which I am revisiting in this article, I explored ways of approaching the idea of multivoiced dialogic interaction that could emphasize the rhetorical situation and position students as *thinkers and interpreters of rhetorical situations*—as *rhetorical agents.* I did this by developing and exploring the implementation of an educational design that included such approaches as well as dialogic interaction. In the next sections I present the instructional choices included in this educational design.

3.   THE EDUCATIONAL DESIGN

The educational design from the PhD offers an approach to writing as a social action and to the student writer as an agentic rhetorically reflexive writer striving for social change in real life. To support this approach, in my study I incorporated two real-life rhetorical situations as a basis for students' writing, the intention being to encourage them to consider writing as a response to these rhetorical situations. To support dialogic interaction, I asked the students to collaborate on their writing in small groups. In these groups students were to discuss, share, and negotiate ideas and interpretations concerning the rhetorical situations, and on that basis to make rhetorical and language choices reinforcing social change.

To further support the process of rhetorical reflexive doings in writing, I developed a writing map as a tool for structuring the dialogic interaction between the student writers in each group.

My aim with the writing map was not to structure the form of dialogic interaction, that is, *how* to take turns, respond or incorporate each other's ideas. Rather, I sought to organize on *what* the students' dialogic interaction should focus. In line with the FFF model mentioned above, I achieved this focus by asking the students to discuss the following open-ended questions within their groups:
- What is the purpose of our writing? What kind of change do we want to make?
- What is the topic and how does this topic support our purpose?
- Who are the readers of our text, and how do we want to position these readers in the text in order to support the purpose?

- How do we want to position ourselves in the text? How do we want the readers to think about us in order to support the purpose?

In asking these questions the students became positioned as rhetorical agentic writers whose interpretations of and perspectives on how to approach a rhetorical situation were validated.

The hypothesis was that anchoring the writing process in real-life rhetorical situations and the organizing writing map would underpin and qualify students' rhetorical reflections concerning 1) exigence (the intention/purpose/topic of writing), 2) the audience/addressees and their realm of understanding/possible reactions, and 3) the constraints (facts, relations and other utterances related to the topic).

4.   IMPLEMENTATION AND DATA COLLECTION

As part of the project, I implemented the educational design in a 5th-grade classroom in spring 2016. I introduced the students to a real-life situation whereby they would write letters to students from a neighbouring school about to merge with theirs. More specifically, political negotiations had led to a reorganization of the community's public schools that meant the year group to which my informant students belonged would have an extra class the following school year.

Although having defined the situation as rhetorical and determined the medium and genre of the students' responses, I wanted to allow the writing to be guided by how the students defined the exigence, that is, the social motive for writing. After organizing the students into groups, I asked them to interact dialogically with each other and the situation by negotiating interpretations and possible choices.

As I worked to implement the design, I objectified the real-world situation by holding plenary discussions about the possible attitudes and feelings these new students might have and how they could react to the situation (including emotionally).

Drawing from the writing map questions, the teacher was to supervise students during the writing process and thus engage them in a dialogic interaction that could support reflectivity. I hoped that this interaction would make producing a text aimed at a positive change in real life a meaningful experience.

In planning and organizing the implementation of the design, I obtained the written consent of all the students and have used pseudonyms to anonymize them in the data presented here. The class teacher and I also agreed that I was to be the primary teacher in the classroom, so I did most of the presentations, supervisions and recaps. As such, in the classroom I was a participant observer of the teacher in action through my participation (as a teacher) in activities and dialogic interaction with students as well as a participant observer of students' participation through my observation of the dialogic interaction and activities, also predominantly in the role of teacher (Wadel et al., 2014, p. 52).

This dual role in the project gave me insight into the experience of having and feeling the responsibility of being a teacher for those students at that school trying to pursue the disciplinary intentions embedded in that specific design and situation. A few months after collecting my data and leaving the field, I put the data into an analytic framework.

5.   ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK AND DATA

The above design represents an ideal for how students and teachers might enact and experience themselves as writers and writing teachers, respectively. I did not offer the students this positioning aimed at this particular enactment and experience just once and then leave the rest to the writing map. Rather, the collaborating teacher and I continuously reconstructed the positioning by virtue of how we actualized positionings and communicated in the classroom, and the students did so by virtue of how they reconstructed the writer positions offered them.

My analytic perspective on positioning is largely informed by Davies and Harré, who see positioning as something that occurs when people interact: because of what we do and say, we continuously create subject positions for ourselves (reflexive positioning) and others (interactive positioning) (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48). These subject positions encompass categories to which we as people can belong.

For the purpose of this article, I focus on some of the data concerning explicit verbal dialogic interaction between me as a teacher and the students. My aim here is to explore and describe how both the teacher and students actualize positioning processes that construct opportunities for students to contribute their rhetorical reflections and viewpoints through the particular ways they interact and express experiences. The concept of positioning thus plays a crucial role for the students in three ways:

1)   in the very way their teacher invites them to write and act as conversational writing partners;
2)   in students' acceptance, rejection, or reconstruction of the writer position offered, as actualized in their process of making choices and taking action as writers by doing something;
3)   and through the way they position themselves and their readers by making specific content choices and drawing on specific voices.

To explore these issues, I have selected the voice-recorded dialogic interaction of two student groups in which I as the teacher took part. Using these examples, I demonstrate and discuss how positionings are actualized. To this end, I highlight the significance of the real-world situation and the intended disciplinary foundation of the student's' text production as well as examine

•   how multivoiced dialogic interaction is realized and challenged, and
•   how rhetorical reflection is and is not realized as students themselves choose their voices and position in the dialogic interaction.

Such in-depth descriptions of these interactions can help to elucidate the potentials and challenges connected to dialogic teaching focused on student–teacher dialogic interaction related to writing for real-life purposes. As I illustrate below, not every student participated in the collaborative text production in the ideal manner presented above. Neither did my participation (as a teacher) always support this ideal participation. However, before discussing the challenges, I would like to present an example of a successful dialogic interaction that not only encompasses rhetoric reflection, including thoughtful and subtle considerations, but also makes room for the students' own voices.

5.1 Analysis: above average

Martha and Trine are collaborating on their letter to the new students. They have decided to tell the new students what the school is like but ask for my advice on which topics to address. Martha already has some ideas, declaring she would like to include information about an AKT teacher (a person trained to work with students appearing to struggle with social well-being). Trine seems to be more cautious:

> Well, I think that the thing about the AKT teacher is important to include, of course. However, if we don't include anything about what we can actually do, what we do and such, then it will just turn into, then it will not turn out that well. Then it will seem as if some old lady has written it—and nothing about all the fun stuff you can do…

In the above, the students seem to recognize themselves in and identify with the writer position offered by ascribing significance to their choice of content. Trine constructs the suggested topic as content that does not fully connect with how she wishes to position herself in the text. Although recognizing that they may address the topic, she points out that all the 'fun stuff' contributes to a more desirable positioning in her eyes. Martha agrees they should focus on what they can actually do but insists on addressing the AKT teacher topic, suggesting that they mention the AKT teacher *'just a little bit, a few lines or such'*. In other words, the students are negotiating choices and unpacking the consequences of making them.

During the following dialogic interaction, we broach different topics, and at one point I ask them how they would like to position themselves in the text. To depict how such a positioning could be actualized, I provocatively suggest that they write about the school's high academic level and about the high academics of the students, who do at least two hours of homework a day[1]. This provocation seemed to work, because Martha and Trine tell me at length that this is not true; they do not spend that much time on their homework. However, this discussion leads to another discussion about whether they should mention that their school or class performed above average in a reading assessment last year.

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[1] *I considered this speech act provocative based on my interpretation of these two students as not wanting to position themselves in relation to peers as people who were keen to do homework.*

Trine	You don't have to like brag about it … You know, as if … You know, if … I don't recall whether it is our class that is above average or if it is the school in itself, but suppose we write that we are above average, then it would be like bragging about being better than them. And suppose we write that and they transfer to here and then suddenly we would be way below average, then we would make them feel bad. And it is not for sure, anyway, that that will happen, right? Maybe the result would turn out even better … Umm …
Teacher	But you should at least consider it, that if you want to tell that in your writing—and you can and you may do that—then you will just have to consider whether you achieve the goal you have set for your text.
Martha	It might also be that they're above average and then, when they come here, we could learn something from them. And then we would jump to the very top.
Trine	Uh, I don't think so. This is a very stupid school …
Teacher	However, you need to consider whether it's important to you, to your goal; is it important to the impression you want to make of yourselves in the text? Is it important to the feeling you want the reader to feel when the reader reads your text? You may think that the reader is someone who really wants to go to a school where they perform well above average. But it may also have another effect in that they will think, 'Oh no, then I am way below in how I am doing in school compared to the students at the West School.' And that may not be your goal …
Trine	Well, I know some of them … umm, and it is not that they do very badly, but in our class, especially in Danish, we are way above average—I don't know why … So it may have an impact, because again, they're not doing very badly, but they don't do well either.
Teacher	No, no, I do see what you mean, but the question is whether it's important to tell them according to what you want—to what your project is in writing this text.
Trine	Perhaps they are not that much into whether we are above the national average or not.
Teacher	No, it may be that they're completely indifferent to it. However, that's something which you'll have to consider: what is it? … The reader should preferably be interested and think that the text you're writing is in their interest.
Trine	Yes, if I were the one transferring to the East School, and I was told that they were above average, then I would think 'ydhrk!, I'm not good enough at this', because you would like, of course, to keep this idea that you're doing better.
Teacher	Then it's also according to what's important to you. Do you think it's important to tell them that about your school, about you? Is it something you want to focus on?

In this example the students engage in a co-construction whereby they relate to the reader's realm of understanding during their dialogic interaction with the teacher, thus making text production something meaningful, where it really matters what one writes. In other words, the students can relate to the situation and identify it as

rhetorical, seeing their potential to make a difference for the new students (and for themselves, as the new students will perceive them in a certain way) by virtue of the choices they make.

In some parts of the discussion, the students focus on what will happen to the average after the school merger. This is not irrelevant to text production. However, I make it clear to the students that I want them to consider the significance and consequences of what they write and not the consequences of the merger. I stress that although they may include the average in the text, they must also consider whether it supports their project, what they want—their writing goal. In other words, I do not tell them what writing is suitable as a response to the specific situation but highlight the importance of consideration and encourage them to reflect on the possible consequences of what they write. Put differently, I position the two students as writers that need to reflect and make their own choices based on these reflections.

Trine appears to reflect on consequences in the first line, stating that mentioning being above average amounts to bragging. In this case, she judges that bragging would not be a good idea because the assessment result could change and thus render the statement untrue. This shows that Trine is paying attention to the consequences of a particular reflective positioning. However, it is not until she imagines herself in the new students' shoes slightly later in the dialogic interaction that she emphasizes the effect on the reader, saying:

> If I were the one transferring to the East School, and I was told that they were above average, then I would think 'ydhrk! I'm not good enough at this', because you would like, of course, to keep this idea that you're doing better'.

This sympathetic insight also seems to turn the recipient into something more perceptible. Furthermore, the quotation demonstrates how Trine feels ethically obliged to position herself and the school in a non-threatening and welcoming way.

The above example demonstrates how pluralism is represented in the dialogic interaction because of the different ideas about and perspectives on the content. As the students and I engage in co-construction, they become involved in a real-world writing event invited by a real-world rhetorical situation that they (or at least Trine) can relate to personally. By relating to this situation, they also get stirred into a rhetorical reflexive writing practice, as they reflect on possible rhetorical choices and how these choices are actually actions that carry possible social consequences and change.

However, not all students find this situation easy to relate to, and dialogic interaction that makes room for pluralistic interpretations is not always easy for the teacher to support. In the following section, I demonstrate how these challenges manifest themselves.

5.2 Analysis: 'that's not what we want'

The relationship to the reader as a constitutive element emerged in various ways. I just demonstrated how Trine took an example from the new students to understand the rhetorical situation better. However, not all students could identify with the reader in this way, and some dialogic interactions even suggest some students were uninterested in relating to the new students in their writing. In other words, they apparently identified no personal meaningful purpose in accommodating the new students. One student even asserted, 'We don't even want them to come here.' In addition, this possible lack of personal purpose and exigence seems to affect their discursive attitudes—how they wish to position themselves—in the texts and, at least from my perspective as a teacher, expresses an indifference to the new students. Next, I examine the dialogic interaction within Gina's group to illustrate how these discursive attitudes/positionings can, indeed, challenge a teacher trying to make room for multiple voices.

Gina's group had decided to focus on providing the new students with information about the school's outdoor area. From my perspective as a teacher, at one point I observed that the students seemed to take a knowledge-driven approach to their writing. Indeed, they appeared to write whatever spontaneously came to mind without any notable rhetorical reflection. Later, the group notified me that they had finished their text. In my subsequent discussion with them, I felt the need to impose a more profound level of discipline that could help the students progress beyond knowledge-driven text production and instead rhetorically reflect on their choices and the actions they were taking by virtue of their writing.

Gina	Now, we're finished, Teacher, we're finished.
Ana	I don't think we need to add any more writing.
Gina	We don't want it long. It's fine with us.
Ana	Well, we didn't write that much more, but …
	[…]
Teacher	Well, alright, I just need to hear … What did you say? … What was your purpose for writing this text? What did you want to achieve?
Ana	That one …
Gina	Well, what we can do outside and …
Teacher	And why do they [the new students] need to know that?
Ana	Because then they know what they can do.

Teacher	So they know what they can do. All right. What did you write about? … How, how do you want to project yourselves? Did you consider that? How you want to project yourselves.
Ana	Someone who wants to tell them, what, what you can do …
Student	We're three girls… Do you remember that? [student addressing another student]
Teacher	That means … well … that means someone who wants to write, so that … someone who wants to help maybe?
Gina	In a way, yes.
Teacher	Yes. What more … Ana, are you with us? What … how do you want to project yourselves a bit more clearly? Gina, you say, you say … Gina, sort of say, like, like someone who wants to … well … wants to tell the new students about what you can do, right?
Gina	Hmm.
Teacher	That means you would like to project yourselves as helpful.
Gina	Yes.
Teacher	Did you consider anything else that you would like to project yourselves as?
Ana	We could welcome them into our play; maybe invite them into our play, maybe …
Teacher	Yes, that's something you could do. So that would also be one of your goals. You may actually say that that is the purpose, because you want to welcome them …
Gina	Really, how can that be? …
Ana	Well, we can help them not to feel left out, just because they are the new ones and such. It's like …
Teacher	What are you saying, Ana? It's because when I ask you about these things, then it's because I'm thinking what is it that you want to achieve. And then I look at your text and then maybe you don't need to put down anymore writing …
Students	Yeah!
Teacher	… It might also be that I think, 'Ah, maybe you could …'
Gina	That's not what we want to achieve! We just want to tell them what you can do outside …
Laura	And you don't find many people who would bother to read …
Teacher	What did you say, Ana?
Ana	That we could write that they don't have to feel like left [out] … it's not as if … it's not as if, when they're here in the beginning, that in the beginning they don't have to stand there and talk, but that they just do something … that they, yes, do something….

Teacher	[inaudible]
Ana	You may feel … because you tell them … yes …
Teacher	Alright, you know what, that's, I think, a good point that Ana has. Because … You should really write that down in some way. Because your text says: we're three girls from West School who want to tell you about the outdoor area. And then you might add … And why is that? Why write that? And then that's what you're saying [addressing Ana]. THAT you may try to project. That's kind of the reason why you want to … that would be a very good point to include … among others.

In my efforts to get the students to reflect rhetorically on their writing—especially on why they wrote the way they did—I put myself in an inquiring position, asking them what they wanted to achieve and how they wanted to position themselves. However, in my feedback, I did not validate their definition of purpose. The students wanted to inform the new students about facilities and possible outdoor activities at the school, but I was encouraging them to consider their social motive (exigence) for providing all this information and what kind of social action the act of informing constituted, including what this action made them as writers.

In other words, I insisted that the students think of the writing as a means of relating to the new students and through this writing and relation-building thereby position themselves as helpers. Gina accepted this position twice, but I doubt the extent to which she agreed the position was attractive for them. In the following part of the dialogic interaction, Ana expanded their writing purpose by suggesting they approach their writing as a welcoming act. I assessed this suggestion as highly applicable and asked her to repeat it on two occasions. Gina, however, did not agree with this welcoming approach, stating, *'We just want to tell them what you can do outside.'*

Later that day, I returned to the discussion about their reflective positioning. Gina stood by her statement and elaborated on it by saying, *'This is exactly how we want it'* and *'We don't want to project ourselves more personally or anything'* (Molbæk, 2019, pp. 205–207). So, Gina's earlier acceptance of my invitation to the girls to position themselves as helpers may simply have been a tactic meant to make me agree they were finished. On the other hand, perhaps she was simply not keen on investing in a relationship to the new students by reflectively positioning herself as helpful or by presenting a personal picture of herself.

Still, as this dialogic interaction ended, I seemed to ignore her protest. Moreover, by emphasizing Ana's proposal and explicitly concluding that I thought she had a good point, I unintentionally projected my own definition of exigence onto the students' definition. Indeed, I utilized Ana's statements to represent my own definition of exigence and the writing objectives and positioning I had deduced from the rhetorical situation.

I intended the writing assignment to anchor the students' writing in a real-world situation, believing that this writing basis might prompt students to assume a

position from which writing could be enacted as social action towards change. This enactment was intended to be based on the students' personal engagement, their interpretations, the purpose they identified and possible positions. As such, in the above conversation, I am so eager to make the students enact rhetorically reflexive thinking that will make them position themselves as helpful and caring and consider the social significance of their writing that I arguably end up impeding the pluralistic dialogic interaction. Ultimately, however, Gina and Laura resisted my requests, instead standing by their desire to pursue an essentially dissociated approach in which they relate to the new students more as informants than helpful peers.

6.   DISCUSSION

My examples show the challenge of inviting students into rhetorical reflective writing processes while also enabling them to uphold their own interpretations and voices. The dialogic interaction between Trine, Martha, and me demonstrates, though, that students can interact dialogically by interpreting and reflecting rhetorically on constituents related to the real-world situation as well as reflect on rhetorical choices. The dialogic interactions covered here also demonstrate that teachers can make room for multiple voices at the same time.

The realism of the situation may have positively affected Martha and Trine's sense of the sphere of communication and their ability to reflect and discuss constituents and possible consequences. The dialogic interaction between them shows that they recognize and perceive the readers and care to some extent about the impression they give of themselves as writers. When it comes to content, Trine in particular approaches the rhetorical choices they, as writers, make as being of vital importance. She recognizes that what they include in their letter might impact how the new students picture the school and themselves as peers, and through their interaction Trine and Martha negotiate possible choices.

Thus, these two students seem to define the situation as rhetorical, spot a personal exigence and discuss and identify possible reflective positions suitable for addressing the situation. They are stirred into a writing practice in which negotiated choices compose certain texts. As a teacher, I recognized this reflexivity and positioning towards the situation. This may be the very reason I succeeded in interacting dialogically in a way that positioned the students as independent interpreters and made room for pluralism.

However, realism and the ideal of rhetorical reflection can also prevent participation—both my own and that of the students. The students in Gina's group did not say whether the situation's realism heightened their perception of the constituents, including the readers' realm of understanding. In any case, contrary to Trine and Martha, whose reflections related to how the new students' might respond to their letter, Gina's group appeared averse to relating to the new students. From their point of situatedness, they may have felt unclear about what was in it for them and how an accommodating letter to the new students might bring positive change

in their own lives ('We don't even want them to come here'). At the least, they were unwilling to relate to the new students in the way I invited them to—a way that demanded a rhetorical approach and an accommodating attitude. Had the situation been fictional, Gina might have been more willing to adopt a rhetorical approach and positive attitude towards playing a role (imagine you are X writing to Y) and thus exploring a more personal and solidary way of relating to peers in a similar—but simulated—rhetorical situation.

My recognition that Martha and Trine were engaged in rhetorical reflexive negotiations enabled me to interact dialogically according to my intentions and to make room for voices. On the other hand, by defining Gina's positioning to the new students as knowledge-driven, unreflective, and indifferent, I may have determined the course of my interaction with Gina. My interpretation of the situation and the fact that the new students would actually read their text led me to consider her position inappropriate.

When interacting with Gina's group, I asked the students leading questions with a view to guiding them to construct (or think about) their writing in very specific way. However, in this attempt, I not only positioned myself as the primary reader of the students' text, but I also accidentally positioned the student writer as an imitator of the teacher—the ways that teacher conceives of legitimate discourse and defines the constituent parts, including exigence. Accordingly, I failed to provide a position from which the students could bring their own interpretations into play. I positioned myself as the teacher showing the way, rather than the teacher spurring them to find the way based on their situatedness, their situation and their perspective. As a result, even though the situation itself was real, the students ironically had to step into a role in order to participate as student writers.

Hence, realism and the teacher's attitude can limit students' options for interacting dialogically and making choices about the exigence in their writing—a limitation that serves to supress student voices. Kvistad and Otnes make a similar argument about cases where students are asked to write to a friend (Kvistad & Otnes, 2019, p. 115). The language, stylistics, and—I would add—choices made about the topic and content based on student's interpretations of situations may differ greatly from what a teacher sees as legitimate discursive attitudes or self-positionings based on his or her own interpretations.

This unintentional positioning only demonstrates the importance of paying attention to students' positioning. However, Hetmar also claims that not every position in the classroom is negotiable (Hetmar, 2019, p. 207). She argues that the educational intentions from a disciplinary standpoint (in this case rhetorical reflection in writing) must align with the possible self-positionings. Similarly, I believe that there needs to be a certain student writer position—as a writer *of* the text—to perform the intended rhetorical approach that can bring multiple voices into play. Moreover, inviting students to approach writing rhetorically may require challenging their initial perspective on the rhetorical situation and their definition of the exigence. Unfortunately, in my first interaction with Gina's group, my struggles to

stir Gina into this kind of rhetorically reflexive dialogic interaction resulted in a curtailment that also limited her possibilities for discursively positioning herself as a writer in the text.

7. CONCLUSION

Although real-world writing holds the potential for students to visualize how writing approaches reality, I have demonstrated how it may also constrain student and teacher participation in a way that fictive situations do not.

Writing in school occurs in an ambiguous sphere of communication that students can have difficulty handling, even when writing in real-life situations. The dialogic interactions presented in this article show that this ambiguity is also difficult for the teacher to handle. Despite the fact that I (as a teacher) intended to make room for pluralism, including students' perspectives and interpretations of constituents, the reality and my personal ideas about student intentions and legitimate discourses sometimes prevented me from interacting and participating as intended.

Writing that has no consequences (other than the teacher's assessment) creates room for pluralism by allowing students to explore positions and topic constructions that might otherwise not be tolerated (whether ethically or socially) or attempted in real life. In the classroom, writing processes conducted in fictive situations can serve as safe windows through which students can interpret and respond to situations in pluralistic ways.

Writing for real purposes is certainly more binding, but this binding can also open one's eyes to the nature of writing and the desirability of rhetorical reflection. A real-world obligation can support reflection and help delimit not only the sphere of communication and the constituents, including the reader's realm of understanding, but also the idea of approaching reality by writing, writing as a social action. As such, I would argue, real-world situations merit a place in classroom writing exercises.

What, then, is a suitable rhetorical situation for a real-world purpose? Without knowing the answer, I can say that finding a one-size-fits-all solution is improbable. However, one must pay attention not only to students' positioning but also to the possible discourses a specific real-life-situation might invite students to bring into existence: are these discourses ethical? Do they support the common good and correspond to the teacher's intentions? One must also consider how to challenge students who do not want to be challenged or who position themselves that way. An attentiveness to these considerations can help strike the delicate balance between opening up the world of choices available for negotiation and respecting students' situation and voices and the choices they themselves make based on that situatedness.

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