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Opening  
Minds

*Using Language to Change Lives*

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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>v</i>
CHAPTER 1 Choosing Words, Choosing Worlds	1
CHAPTER 2 Learning Worlds: People, Performing and Learning	9
CHAPTER 3 Changing Learning Narratives	23
CHAPTER 4 “Good Job!” Feedback, Praise and Other Responses	35
CHAPTER 5 Any Other Ways to Think About That? Inquiry, Dialogue, Uncertainty and Difference	51
CHAPTER 6 Social Imagination	67
CHAPTER 7 Moral Agency: Moral Development and Civic Engagement	81
CHAPTER 8 Thinking Together, Working Together	93
CHAPTER 9 Choice Worlds	111
<i>Appendix A</i>	<i>125</i>
<i>Appendix B</i>	<i>127</i>
<i>Notes</i>	<i>129</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>139</i>

## *Choosing Words, Choosing Worlds*

*Children seldom misquote you. They usually repeat word for word  
what you shouldn't have said.*

—Unknown

One summer at a family reunion, I went to chat with two of my nieces, ages three and five, who were playing in the sandpit. As I sat down, they greeted me as follows:

**Amelia:** Here's Uncle Peter. Let's play. I'll be the mother.

**Marie:** Yeah, I'll be the little daughter. Uncle Peter can be your husband.

**Amelia:** No. We're not married yet.

This brief interaction captures for me something familiar about language and schooling. In seconds, with a handful of words, and with my relatively passive consent, the girls constructed a world in which we might live for a time – they decided who we would and would not be and what we would be doing. Classrooms are just like this. As teachers, we choose our words and, in the process, construct the classroom worlds for our students and ourselves. The worlds we construct offer opportunities and constraints. Indeed, a few minutes later in the sandpit, driving a steel truck along an imaginary road, Marie lamented, “I need a bigger road.” Looking up she saw the edge of the sandpit and said, with some frustration, “I need a bigger world.”

Recognising the limitations of the world we have constructed is important, but not always easy. Marie had the advantage of seeing the world she had constructed in the context of the larger world beyond. In this book, I show you some different worlds that we construct in the classroom, what is possible and not possible in those worlds, and how we construct them using the tools of our language.

Sometimes a single word changes everything. Robin, a local teacher, asked her colleagues if they had advice on how to cook a wild turkey. Her husband had hit the bird with his truck and he had brought it home for his wife to prepare. Several colleagues offered advice and recipes, but one bystander pointed out that the bird was in fact “road kill”. Robin prepared the turkey according to the recipes, but she couldn’t eat it. Once it had been named as road kill, everything changed. In classrooms, events happen, but their meaning only becomes apparent through the filter of the language in which we immerse them. Children don’t know whether something is a gourmet feast or road kill until their attention is drawn to markers that tell them which world they are in. Introducing a spelling test to a student by saying, “Let’s see how many words you know,” is different from saying, “Let’s see how many words you know already.” It is only one word, but the *already* suggests that any words the child knows are ahead of expectation and, most important, that there is nothing permanent about what is known and not known.

## *A Moment of Teaching*

One morning I was in a friend’s Year 1 classroom. Pegeen (rhymes with Colleen; red hair, Irish) was reading *Snowflake Bentley* by Jacqueline Briggs Martin with the children, an appropriate book under the circumstances. It was winter, and what would become twenty centimetres of snow was falling, complicating the morning commute. Everything was late. As Pegeen was reading, a teacher aide assigned to one of the children arrived, late. Pegeen looked up and greeted her, returned to the children and said, “I just made a big mistake as a reader. I got distracted when someone came into the room. So I’m going to reread this section here.”

One of her students, Michael, said, “That happens to me too.”

“Say more about that,” Pegeen responded.

“Well, I go back and read a bit ... ” and he added a little detail.

Fifteen minutes later there was a brief disruption to the class, and Pegeen reminded them, “What did Michael say? Remember? Go back to the spot and start over.”

Two days later, in the middle of independent reading, one of the children observed, “I need to reread ’cause I just got distracted.”

There is something very ordinary about this set of interactions. Yet, it captures at once the simplicity and the complexity of the language we use with children. None of Pegeen’s comments was strictly necessary. And yet, when she said, “I just made a big mistake as a reader. I got distracted when someone came into the room. So I’m going to reread this section here,” she did two really important things. First, she levelled the power difference between teacher and students. She said, “I make mistakes just like you.” Second, her comment began to explain the meaning of errors. When you make a mistake, it means nothing more than that. Fix it. Learn from it. It does not mean you are incompetent, stupid or not a good person.

Not all Year 1 students – or adults – know this. But if Pegeen’s students don’t learn this lesson, they will not be able to risk taking on learning challenges for fear of making mistakes. And, if they do make a mistake, they won’t be able to talk about it. This would not only deprive the teacher of her most useful assessment information, but it would deprive the class of the opportunity to rehearse agentic narratives – narratives that position them as people who can act and have an impact: “(When I make the mistake of getting distracted) I go back and read a bit (and that fixes it).” Errors usually happen at the edge of what we can do, when we are stretching into new territory – when we are learning.

Pegeen’s “Say more about that” is also less ordinary than it seems. First, it is her best assessment tool. It often lets her know what the children are thinking. At the same time, it gave Michael the sense that he had something to say and, since Pegeen and the other students listened to him, he got the sense that he was respected. This sense was reinforced when Pegeen reminded the children later, “What did Michael say? ...” She didn’t need to say this. She could have just reminded them of the strategy without attributing it to Michael. If giving an accurate account was the point, it was Pegeen, not Michael, who mentioned the strategy. But it was an opportunity for her to position Michael – that is, to create a story-line in which Michael was a particular kind of person. Michael was not one of the most capable readers in the class, but her comment deputised him as the sort of guy who knew something about strategy use and as someone who was worth listening to. He was definitely a guy who

contributed to the conversation. Legitimising student comments like this, not judging them, encourages students to make more contributions to classroom thinking, which in turn offers more opportunities to position students in productive narratives.

This set of interactions might not mean much by itself, but the threads it contains, repeated over and over in different forms, moment to moment, day to day, week to week, month to month, start to amount to something. Their power is strengthened as they echo and reverberate in the children's talk, as we saw two days later when one of the girls noticed she was distracted and needed to fix the problem by rereading. She thought this to herself, forgetting that her mouth was still engaged, thus announcing it to the world. Her announcement rehearsed the strategy, offered another opportunity for peers to learn it, and reinforced Pegeen's assertion that mistakes are nothing to be ashamed of. The students thus took over the narrative, and Pegeen's words resonated through the children's learning lives. The goals the children choose, what they value, the feelings they experience, the identities and relationships they take up, the theories they hold about learning, ideas and people, are all touched by Pegeen's choice of words. Her words change the life of the classroom. They change the worlds the children inhabit, and consequently who they can be, what they will feel, what they can know and what will be normal behaviour.

Teaching is planned opportunism. We have an idea of what we want to teach children, and we plan ways to make that learning possible. When we put our plans into action, children offer us opportunities to say something, or not, and the choices we make affect what happens next. Teaching requires constant improvisation. It is jazz. A child asks a question. Do we answer it? If so, how? How long do we wait before we answer it? If not, what do we say? A child successfully accomplishes something – or fails to. We have another opportunity to say something, but what? My intention with this book is to offer a basis for choosing more productive talk – how to make the most of those opportunities children offer us. More important, I hope to show you that, given that we are playing conversational jazz, it is important that we choose a productive key in which to improvise.

### *Teaching for Now and for the Future*

Year 3 students Manny and Sergio are sitting discussing a book together.<sup>1</sup> The book is *A Picnic in October* by Eve Bunting. The story is

written from the perspective of a young boy who is dragged along with his family each October to the Statue of Liberty for a picnic to celebrate his grandmother's passage into the country. The boy misbehaves, but at the end of the book, he sees the way another couple looks at the statue and he changes his perspective.

**Manny:** No, no, you see, he was rude, but he changed.

**Sergio:** Rude people don't change. He was making fun of everyone; he pretended to throw up ...

**Manny:** That's sick!

**Sergio:** Yeah, but it was because he didn't want to go, he was like mad that they made him ... and embarrassed too, like me when my mom makes me go ...

**Manny:** Yeah, at first, but look here at the end, see (*flips the pages*) – they're leaving, ... here it is ... see, he looks, he looks at the other family – it's like he gets it!

**Sergio:** Let me see again (*grabs book, studies the pictures on the pages Manny showed him, and whisper-reads the words on the pages*).

Oh – you mean like now he gets why the Grandma thinks the statue is a big deal?

**Manny:** Yeah, now he gets it.

**Sergio:** So now it's in his heart, too?

**Manny:** No – well okay, yeah, I guess it could be in his heart, but now he really gets that it's in his grandma's heart.

Several features of this conversation strike me as significant. These children are fully engaged in discussing a book – without a teacher. They are choosing to discuss it and make connections to their own lives. They each have an interpretation of the text, but they are not wedded to that particular interpretation. They disagree with each other and take each other's position very seriously, feeling the need to justify their own position using evidence from the text. Each uses the difference in perspective to expand his own understanding. These children are actually in control of their own development. They don't need the teacher for this (now) – but they need each other. They are in control of their own development because they know how to engage each other (and a book) in such a way that it expands their minds. They understand the value of difference.

These reasons alone would be enough to justify the dialogic teaching that makes these interactions possible, so we will look carefully at dialogic teaching in this book. But in the course of conversations like

Manny and Sergio's, these children and their peers are learning how to participate in a strong democracy. They expect to engage, to disagree and to grow from that disagreement. At some point, they will vote, but that will be after they have understood their own and each other's views and expanded their collective mind in the process. Even if they vote self-interest, it will be enlightened self-interest. They will have a sense of how their self-interest is tied to the interests of the larger community.

There is evidence that interactions like those between Manny and Sergio, and the teaching that leads to them, develop the children's social imagination – their ability to empathise, and to imagine others' thinking. This ability, in turn, increases the probability of healthy moral development; it reduces the likelihood that they will stereotype, it expands their social networks, and it enhances the way they view each other. It also makes them less likely to misbehave at home or at school. Of course, if you are only interested in bluntly academic learning, rest assured that Manny and Sergio are also developing their reading comprehension ability. Also rest assured that the teacher, who can count on Manny and Sergio learning independently together, is freed to work more closely with students who need some focused attention.

Children in classrooms like Manny and Sergio's take these ways of thinking about what they are doing, the relationships and ways of responding to difference, as normal and view themselves and each other through them. They slowly come to embody the interactions – like a dancer's muscles come to own and remember dances. This embodiment is less visible than the smile (or frown) lines with which we shape our faces, but more deeply embedded. A university graduate who had been in such a classroom in primary school had this to say on reflection:

*There was a time in high school where I hit a slump and I had a moment of self-evaluation as to why I felt that way. I realized learning wasn't fun anymore for me; I had to sit down and remember when it was. The [dialogic classroom] period was that for me. That experience gave me something to look back on to remember and hold on to. I told my mother that [dialogic classroom] introduced me to that state of mind that loved to learn. That passion and thirst for learning was one of the many things that is still with me today ... my whole thought process was shaped from that one significant period in my life.<sup>2</sup>*

Because of our embodied histories, much of the time our own responses to children are automatic. We open our mouths and our



parents or our previous teachers come out. Changing our talk requires gaining a sense of what we are doing, our options, their consequences and why we make the choices we make. In this book, I show you how our values, our beliefs and our histories, and the context in which we work, have an impact on the language we choose. I also show you that our language choices have serious consequences for children's learning and for who they become as individuals and as a community. I help you make productive choices, because the language we choose in our teaching changes the worlds children inhabit now and those they will build in the future. Make no mistake, when we are teaching for today, we are teaching into tomorrow.

Honey, when you grow up  
I want you to be assertive,  
independent and strong-willed.  
But while you're a kid,  
I want you to be passive,  
pliable and obedient.

