Critical digital literacies and school reform: Urban teachers' civic action, heteroglossia, and emerging dialogue structures

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Heteroglossia and Emerging Dialogic Structures in Education Reform

Abstract:

The hierarchical organization of the teaching profession and traditional modes of education reform discourse have created a simplistic view of teachers’ responsibility for quality in education. Historically, the structure of and content of education reform discourse has cast teachers in a static role and inhibited their active participation in discussions of educational policy. This paper contextualizes education reform discourse in relation to past educational crisis narratives to interpret recent shifts in the structure of education reform dialogue. Using Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of heteroglossia and addressivity, the authors examine contributions to online discussions and debate composed ostensibly by urban teachers in response to top-down reform discourses. The data were analyzed with respect to discursive choices and grouped subsequently as themed arguments and rhetorical moves. The authors argue that teachers’ strategic responses to education reform exemplify the notion of heteroglossia as they challenge stifling truisms of reform that seek to suspend discussion of all other factors besides teacher quality. Teachers’ use of critical digital literacies thus re-creates critical conversations in place of monologues about school improvement. The online, public discussion of education reform by urban teachers marks a shift in the structure of reform discourse that has the potential to benefit those currently faulted for a variety of social problems. Examining this shift in the discourse of educational policy creates opportunities for teachers, policymakers, and educational researchers to re-examine their roles in dialogue around education reform.

Keywords: Education reform; Teacher activism; Dialogism; Heteroglossia; Addressivity; Critical digital literacies; On-line civic participation
A litany of social, professional, and discursive conditions has positioned teachers as passive, longsuffering martyrs (Burke & Segall, 2015; Lortie, 1975). Their voices are rarely included in dialogue outside of the classroom. In the realm of educational policy debate today, teachers often feel powerless and excluded from discussions (Author A, 2012) about how to best approach teaching and learning. The pattern of teachers’ transactions with directives issued by school administrators and policy makers point to the hierarchical organization of the teaching profession. Our work examines how speech is being produced in the conflict-laden environment of education reform. We focus specifically on heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1981) teacher communication online as evidence of new patterns in the organization of the teaching profession. The dynamic nature of language and the evolution of speech communication tools afford teachers the ability to speak outside of their classrooms in spite of discourse structures that have dominated the education reform speech community.

Teachers’ use of Web 2.0 tools to critique, interpret, distribute, and comment on education reform exemplifies critical digital literacies. Critical digital literacies are reading and composing practices that position people as active agents in digitally mediated social spaces (Authors, 2014). Specifically, we are interested how digitally mediated composition enables teachers to take a more active and prominent role in the discussion of U.S. educational policy (e.g. Strauss, 2015). This paper examines the changing structure of education reform dialogue by focusing on rhetoric about teachers’ roles as professionals and civic agents by contrasting familiar patterns of teachers being spoken for with new ones in which urban teachers’ public, online statements demand a more inclusive discussion. In other words, we are exploring teachers’ speech acts in relation to changes education reform dialogue.

Bakhtin and Dialogue Structures

An examination of shifting dialogue structure that challenges dominant school reform dialogue necessitates a theory of language that makes such changes visible against relevant social and technological background. Bakhtin juxtaposes language conceived as a static whole with language that lives and transacts with real people and events, including changes in how utterances are communicated (i.e. printed texts and the Internet). Bakhtin (1981) argued that “language—like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives—is never unitary” (p. 288) beyond the abstract grammatical systems of normative forms. Utterances exist in a complex chain where history, culture, and context are ever-present and socially situated exerting decentralizing forces on meaning and making it possible for the chain to be extended, and thus altered, as it is imbued with new meaning. While Bakhtin argued that languages do become stratified in terms of the speech genres employed within professions, as in discipline-specific patterns of communication, he was careful to point out that these stratified languages “intersect with one another in many different ways” (p. 291). These intersections create conditions for diverse dialogue structures in social, verbal interaction. Bakhtin’s principle of responsiveness of language or addressivity provides a lens for viewing social interactions through language. In this view, every utterance responds to previous and anticipates future utterances. Speech reflects speakers’ planning and efforts to control others’ responses. Bakhtin (1981) argued that each utterance has the ability “to
infect with its own intention” (p. 290) impose semantic nuances that are designed to elicit responses from potential addressees. Central to this principle is the idea that “the word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it” (p. 279). Each word chosen by a speaker is tethered to an often-complex social history. Words exist in tension-filled environments that color their meanings, which harmonize with some elements and create dissonance with other elements of this dialogic process. Because we view speech as a form of strategic social action, we can use language to interpret a cultural setting, its power struggles, and dialogue structures.

Bakhtin (1981) provides a framework for distinguishing utterances with respect to the types of audience responses they elicit—ranging from bare acquiescence or rejection to wresting new meaning. This spectrum facilitates reading uneven communication settings, where it helps explain how some members’ opportunities for response are restricted. Furthermore, Bakhtin’s theory of language helps characterize and interpret divergent speech patterns in order to consider the implications of the existence of responses that resist potential speech plans.

Communication in “Top-down” organizational relationships may be understood, through this lens, as being speech plans crafted by a relatively small number of speakers who are seeking to elicit acquiescence and require no other response. However, it is difficult to maintain centralized control of speech situations because language “language is half someone else’s” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). Neither it nor a meaning intended to accompany it can be forced. The prior social histories of words exist in a perpetual state of evolution and they bump up against potential meanings. More simply put, a speech plan is just that: a plan. That is not to say that language does not offer speakers tremendous potential to narrow likely responses. However, the speaker cannot, without fail, elicit a specific response from a specific addressee, much less unknown potential addressees. Carefully crafted utterances—even strategically created arguments, and rhetorical strategies—therefore are subject to the ever-shifting rhetorical environments in which they exist.

The dynamic nature of language and its resistance to a univocal message becomes an even more powerful factor when the individuals whom a “Top-Down” utterance is seeking to silence believe they are being asked to act against their conscience and professional training. While the speaker may be uninterested in any response beyond audiences, he or she cannot preclude the addressee from bringing the utterance into live speech, wresting new meaning from it, and crafting a new utterance to be shared with countless potential addressees.

**New Literacies, Bakhtin, and Communication**

Bakhtin’s (1984b) account of language change is anchored in the religious, social, and technological upheaval known collectively as the Renaissance. Religious non-conformism, inexpensive printing, and the shift toward social contracts from the Divine Right of Kings exemplify the “rebirth” of human civilization through profound revision of the speech events that order human life. Bakhtin sought to explain human culture through the way its texts are produced. This effort is relevant in the Digital Age. Internet
users have almost limitless capacity to contest not only religious and political scripts, but create their own at very little cost. Digital composition on the World Wide Web super-affords the textual work Bakhtin associated with Renaissance upheaval: Social networks, hyperlinks, cutting-and-pasting, memes, instantaneous messaging, and multigenre texts enable users to find new religions and press for legal protection, publish unfathomable oceans of text for pennies, and strip sovereign governments of their capacity to rule. From a Bakhtinian perspective, we argue that digital media boosts speakers’ capacity to drag previous utterances into live speech and wrest new meaning from them. Digital media’s affordances should not be read as straightforwardly democratic. On the contrary, affordances for user-generated content share bandwidth with messages that create an aura of factuality (Geertz, 1993) that make dissent appear futile. To characterize digital media tools as a panacea that guarantees meaningful participation would be missing the point of language as site of social struggle.

**Education Reform and the Role of Teachers**

In Aristotle’s Politics, schools are expected to protect the state by replicating the actions, knowledge, and relationships that are the foundation of the state. The classical notion that schools should prevent social problems has morphed over time into a kind of trap that blames schools for longstanding social problems. In the Kerner Report following urban unrest in the mid-1960s, schools were left holding the bag for “two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal” (1968, p. 1). With the launch of Sputnik and Cold War fears that U.S. global preeminence was waning, A Nation at Risk (1983) dramatized a crisis in which schools were making the nation vulnerable.

Decades of neoliberal reforms have since privileged numerous reform measures, such as high-stakes testing, as a means of regulating teacher performance (Goldstein, 2014; Kohn, 2011; Ravitch, 2013). The blame for the perceived crisis is being laid at the feet of teachers. As the rhetoric has intensified to portray teachers as the problem plaguing U.S. schools, teachers have employed critical digital literacies to disrupt and challenge prevailing narratives (Authors, 2014) and materially alter the structure of education reform debate.

**Persuasive Language, The Social World, and Education Reform**

The language of education reform draws upon a social history linking the problems of society and the mandate that schools should function to fix those problems. From Aristotle to the Kerner Commission schools have been assigned the civic role of preserving the state and curing societal problems. This perspective has made it easy for education reform rhetoric to frame teachers as culpable for persistent social problems. In this way, schools become theatres whose stages are populated by static characters who only have one civic role to play: teaching the students in their charge—while magically banishing society’s problems in the process. In this static role, teachers are not expected to take civic action from locations beyond their clearly delineated marks on the stage.

The notion of teacher accountability drives the rhetoric in the education reform speech community. The rhetoric of dominant school reform narratives locates teachers as the most important factor in school effectiveness (Carnegie, 2007). However, this fixation
on teachers as the key to school improvement places teachers in an awkward position because these key figures are relegated to acting only in the context of their classrooms within traditional dialogue structures. This issue becomes even more problematic because the education reform school community can’t boast of a rich dialogue with members of the teaching profession.

In the context of education reform, crisis narratives dramatize the need for action oftentimes by framing what is happening metaphorically. The Kerner Commission report of the 1960’s presented a crisis narrative couched in sociopolitical catastrophe, making analogies and metaphors that connect to negative, dangerous, and unwanted social memories. Its rationale for educational reform confronts readers with a picture of a segregated, economically stagnant United States almost exactly 100 years after the bloodiest war in U.S. history was waged to preserve unity. In hopes for social unity, the Kerner Commission Report (1968) threatens “polarization of the American community” (p. 1) and positions artificially integrated schools as a straightforward solution. The Commission positioned schools as responsible for urban unrest because they have failed to produce a nation united.

In 1983, A Nation at Risk repeated the school failure line, this time blaming schools for the loss of “once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation” (p. 1). From the opening pages, the document enacts a speech plan that seeks to incite fear by creating the sense that the nation is under attack. If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge (p. 3). Acts of war and educational disarmament metaphorically underwrite educational reform as a Cold War necessity. This Manufactured Crisis (Berliner & Biddle, 1995) encouraged Americans to seek security through seemingly straightforward measurements of student achievement.

For a nation who had followed with great anxiety the price of oil and value of U.S. enterprises in the midst of the oil crisis of the late 1970s, school failure could be understood as placing the nation at risk and strictly numerical assessment could be understood as an absolute necessity. The report hailed standardized testing data as “rocks of stability in a sea of unanchored opinions” (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 14). Evoking a stock’s potential for losing value, standardized testing data were used to sound the alarm and rally the reform movement to stop what appeared to be steep declines in student achievement. This line of rhetoric cleared the way for the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to be passed in 2001. The logic asserted by official reformers was that education could be most effectively improved by creating consequences for schools’ collective scores on standardized tests (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Current initiatives extend those consequences to individual teachers. This can be clearly seen in the use of Value-Added Models (VAM) that evaluate teachers based on the test scores of their students. The
statistical validity problems associated with VAM (Rush & Scherff, 2015) punctuate a long history of positioning schools as the savior of society.

**Critical Digital Literacies and Teacher Voice**

Our interest in the way language functions and the ways in which teachers are using language to challenge reform narratives and question the reform narratives that have emerged as simplistic solutions to complex problems guides our study. With a perspective theoretically linking the crafting of online statements to quality of the discursive process employed, we asked how critical digital literacies facilitate teachers’ efforts to challenge the status quo and assert themselves in educational policy debates? We used the following subquestions:

1) What arguments characterizing urban education reform appear in online posts purporting to represent the perspectives of urban teachers?
2) How does the construction or presentation of these arguments seek to manage or evoke responses among potential addressees?
3) What goals are evident in these speech plans?

**Method**

In order to interpret possible changes in the structure of dialogue, we focused on how the arguments and rhetorical moves contained in the teachers’ utterances suggest divergent dialogue structure. Ethnography of Communication (Saville-Troike, 2003) enabled us to examine patterns of language use in speech communities discussing education reform. Such patterns occur in communication situations among members of speech communities. The ethnographic perspective asserts that what is said and who says what in such situations has much to teach us about how human life is ordered through language in particular contexts.

This method is particularly useful for understanding changes in a communication setting such as in a household, as children increasingly respond and initiate in speech situations formerly characterized by one-sided talk. In this case, we hoped to capture empirically the restructuring of education reform discussions that historically spell changes for, but seldom with teachers. The method frames speech communities as being constantly reproduced through events, which are in turn comprised of speech acts. Thus, speech acts that do not conform to prior speech event formats can either signal non-membership in a speech community or efforts to alter the event as well as, perhaps, the speech community.

**Speech Community**

Speech community is a concept derived from ethnography that identifies that binding effect upon individuals of shared interactional codes. Ethnographies of speaking seek to understand how social roles are constituted through communication—who says what, how, when, and to whom. Patterned speech is observable in communication events, when the structures of interaction governing a speech community are enacted. In this paper, we conceptualize speech communities as intersecting around questions of education. In particular, we are looking at a community—Education Reform Speech Community—in which rhetorical practices about improving education produce directives.
for the teaching profession. More specifically, we are interested the assertion by urban teachers of a different role in that speech community.

**Speech Event**
A church bulletin is an apt illustration of the place of the speech event within the speech community. There may be both stated and tacit rules governing who may introduce certain topics or speak at all, and membership may be defined according to understanding of communication expectations in a given event.

**Speech Act**
Speech events are comprised of speech acts. Speech acts are utterances that serve a function of communication. They reveal important information about a speech community, when aggregated with many other speech acts. Patterns in speech acts suggest how order in communities is produced in language—who speaks, about what, when, etc.

**Data Collection**
With the increasing prominence of teacher’s protests in the news and the recognition of the disproportional effect of education reform on urban settings, we were interested in urban teachers’ responses to education reform rhetoric. We collected teachers’ utterances about educational reform as speech acts occurring within public, education reform speech events, which are elements of a highly politicized struggle over school and teacher quality. Our interest in the potential for critical digital literacies to facilitate the teachers’ efforts to participate in the education reform speech community (Authors, 2014) led us to focus on how urban teachers were using Web 2.0 tools to craft arguments related to school reform. For this study, we turned to the Internet and used focused search terms (i.e., urban teacher blog, blog on teacher evaluations, why inner-city school teachers have it harder, teacher evaluations aren't fair), to collect data from social media platforms using Internet searches linking urban teachers and educational reform. The first step in this process was to use search engines to gather urban teachers’ online, public statements from a variety of online public discussion spaces. We restricted data collection to statements related to current issues in education reform. Once statements crafted by those who presented themselves as urban teachers were located, we followed the links to the larger utterances to read them in their original contexts (e.g. blog posts; popular media articles). After reading the utterances in their larger contexts, these statements were organized into tables, which catalogued the teachers’ statements for our analysis.

**Data Analysis**
After the data collection phase of our project was complete, we reviewed the data individually and used an initial thematic analysis to code the data and to identify trends in the way those who present themselves as urban teachers respond to educational reform. During this initial step, we sought to identify salient themes and organize the data into broad, theoretical categories for further analysis (Maxwell, 2005). Part of this process involved sifting the data based the dialogic purposes they served. One important layer in the data referred to the argumentative function of whole utterances, defined by Bakhtin as
the minimum complete unit of communication. These layers were linked to participation in a speech community with a history of speaking for teachers and making them liable for school failure. The first layer related specifically to themed arguments and contained the following categories: Failed Mandate, Neoliberal Agenda, Testing, Labor Issues, and Diversity Issues.

The second layer contained smaller units of language that worked between the argument and the speech event. This layer clustered around formal language choices. The following rhetorical move codes were added to the themed argument coding tables: Insider vs. Outsider Status, Intertextuality, Text Features, Critiquing Narrative, Personal Anecdote/Indirect Speech, Historicizing, Rhetorical Question, and Gesture to Authority. We analyzed the arguments and supporting rhetorical moves as evidence of their goals as active members of the educational speech community. Finally, we examined word choices contained in the themed arguments and rhetorical moves in an effort to triangulate possible or prospective efforts to restructure education reform debate. Figure 1 illustrates our qualitative approach to understanding the intersection of linguistic resources contained in teachers’ speech as they enter education reform speech community.

Figure 1. Word choices within utterances triangulate findings from themed arguments and rhetorical moves in reference to educational reform debate.

Findings

In the following sections, we describe how urban teachers’ utterances offer myriad points of connection for readers to participate in a public examination of the issues facing schools and, especially, of the undemocratic approach characterizing much contemporary reform. These utterances point to issues and concepts that the teachers see as missing in the dominant narratives. First, we examine the themed arguments contained in the utterances. Second, we describe the rhetorical moves that facilitate teachers’ efforts to participate in the education reform speech community and deflect the blame for school failure that has been laid at their feet. Finally, we focus on the ways that particular word choices invoked by the teachers represent prior speech events as flawed in order to demonstrate how teachers are altering the structure of the dialogue in the education reform speech community in what amounts to a retrial that marks a shift in teachers’ roles.

Themed Arguments
We paid particular attention to teachers’ arguments because the speech community we seek to understand relies on rational propositions framing teachers as culpable for school failure. The use of arguments that offer alternative explanations for school failure points to an effort to revisit a speech event in which urban teachers were tried, convicted, and sentenced in absentia. They function as a kind of appeals process or retrial, in which new evidence is submitted, alternative explanations offered, and, most importantly, eyewitnesses called to the stand. Of 65 published online statements by Internet users identifiable as distinct urban teachers discussing education reform, 60 included one or more prototypical arguments that deflect blame from teachers for the problems attributed to education. An abbreviated table of utterances grouped by argument theme is included (see Appendix).

Teachers made socioeconomic issues a prominent feature of their arguments. The argument theme Diversity Issues presents numerous utterances that follow the logic, exemplified below, that students’ lived experiences—and especially poverty—must be part of the discussion of educational reform:

If you claim you’re interested in Education Reform but you’re not addressing child poverty, then you’re just blowing smoke. Poverty is the biggest problem facing public education, and almost no one is talking about it.

The category Diversity Issues especially captures arguments in which teachers deflect blame by arguing that their jobs differ because the children and families they work with are not white, middle class speakers of standard English.

Similar issues are incorporated across themed argument categories, as well. Other arguments that exhibit awareness of poverty and related issues frame diversity issues as features of other argument structures or logics. For example, one utterance identifies “Poor and low-income children” as targets of a fundamentally unfair Testing regime in which a system designed to sort by merit actually sorts by socioeconomic status. Another utterance discusses the issue of poverty in argument thematically related to the failed mandate. This teacher argued that, “Christie, like every other Republican governor, is scamming the middle-& upper-middle-class taxpayers with the promise of lowering their taxes by privatizing public education for the poor, while raking in campaign monies from for-profit education corporations.” ‘Scamming’ evoked the theme of a Failed mandate for government, in which those invested with responsibility to safeguard the welfare of children had exploited those in their care. However, the means of exploitation cited in the utterance was specifically aligned with other criticisms of economic theories informing both education reform and political maneuvering, which we grouped under the heading Neoliberal agenda.

The data include many utterances that construct blame-deflecting arguments without reference to students living in poverty. With so many utterances couching their arguments responding to educational reform in terms related to poverty, alternative approaches are of special importance. A string of utterances we coded under the theme Failed Mandate drew readers’ attention to linguistic signals that reveal reform affinities. “It is easy to distinguish Education Reform and Education Reformers from education reform and people working to reform education,” the statement began, “one serves the
Reformers and the other serves the students and the community.” While its thematic orientation places it among Failed Mandate utterances, at greater magnification this utterance critiques reform language and thinking, offering a fascinating shibboleth that purports to reveal reformers’ allegiance:

The first are top-down, include the words “for all students”, and are interested in teacher quality. The latter are bottom-up, include the words “for each student”, and are interested in quality teaching. One gives more authority to the management and executive class without any accountability, the other empowers teachers and students.

We found similar patterns at work under the heading Neoliberal agenda, where utterances connected reform language to its context that readers might otherwise easily miss.

These perspectives sound eerily similar to the countless failed “urban renewal” projects done in cities over the past 60 years—technocrats wanting to demolish what exists and instill their unproven vision of what is best instead of engaging with the people who are already there.

Such utterances positioned the language of education reform as itself as a means of raising readers’ consciousness of educational reform as fundamentally flawed impositions. These critical and even resistant readings of education reform texts dismantle monologues that exclude teachers’ voices.

Numerous such arguments freeze reform rhetoric that seeks to proceed on the basis that teachers must bear responsibility for a range of social problems. Online argumentation affords teachers an opportunity to turn back the clock, contest the aura of factuality of blame rhetoric, and appeal to a broad, popular audience. We see consistent evidence of teachers’ efforts to index and question reform narratives that position teachers as the main cause of school failure.

Rhetorical Moves

Strategically and mechanically these rhetorical moves serve a multitude of roles. Several codes for rhetorical moves, such as Text features, index verbal and syntactical choices geared toward adding emphasis and directing readers’ attention in general. On the other hand, many codes for rhetorical moves—Hyperlink, Rhetorical question, Intertextuality, Critiquing narrative, and Insider/outsider status—function differently by juxtaposing past and present communication acts. They replay pertinent speech events and assert the right to contribute in them. These rhetorical moves place emphasis on their rightful place in the conversation.

Insider/outsider. To illustrate, the following utterance was coded rhetorically as an invocation of insider status: “I challenge anyone to spend one week in an inner city school to see what the reality is because lawmakers and decision makers are out of touch.” We regard the teachers’ choice of words as a strategic move to validate her prospective contributions to one or more speech events she views as fundamentally flawed. Another utterance exemplifies the way insider status levels an attack on dominant patterns in education reform: “Few people outside of schools understand exactly how
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destructive these changes are.” Numerous utterances corresponded to the counter-narrative set up by Insider/outsider rhetoric: Reform that does not grow out of conversations with teachers is part of the problem, not the simple solution.

Critiquing the narrative. To further illustrate the role of rhetorical moves in dragging prior speech events back into living discussion, we discuss examples of utterances coded as Critiquing the narrative. Often working in tandem with explicit intertextual linkages, these utterances often relied heavily upon the content and structure of existing narratives as they sought to rob those narratives of their “aura of factuality” (Geertz, 1993, p. 90) Utterances coded as Critiquing the narrative strategically re-presented parts of education reform debate only to scorn them by pointing out their narrowness, naïveté, or misappropriation. “No matter what measure of ‘quality’ you look at,” wrote one teacher, “poor and minority students—and not just those in inner-city schools—are much less likely to be assigned better-qualified and more-effective teachers.” This act of objectifying and interrogating existing discourse—a fundamental feature of legal proceedings—is ubiquitous in the data. In the following utterance, the phrase “junk science,” an aggressive assault on the validity of the teacher quality reform narrative, is linked: “Value-Added Measures, as these are often called, have been labeled junk science by national statistical organizations.” The link leads the reader to an article attacking the validity of Value Added Measures. The utterance has indirect speech (“has been labeled”) and the bandwagon in its arsenal, yet we find the effort to call up and contest existing narratives particularly important in terms of the struggle over who controls teachers’ voices.

**Teachers’ Critique of the Structure of the Speech Event**

At a finer magnification, the particular words and phrases a speaker uses work together with these rhetorical moves to enact a speech plan. When crafting utterances, a speaker’s selection of specific words carries with it the historical baggage of previous utterances. As each word is chosen, the speaker must confront “a multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down” by social consciousness (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 278). Moreover, those choices are further complicated when combined with the selection of themed arguments issues to address and rhetorical moves to employ. The themed arguments, rhetorical moves, and word choices of these urban teachers’ utterances, critiqued the structure of education reform speech events. Teachers’ utterances are dragging the univocal (or unilateral) discourse of prior speech events into educational reform debates into live speech. Teachers’ strategically represented prior speech events as flawed due to their structure. Some selected language highlighting restricted, non-dialogic speech events: “recipe for mediocrity and bias,” “promise,” “deficit discourse,” and “unproven vision” (emphasis added).

In addition to using pejoratives to characterize the previous utterances of reformers, teachers further upset unilateral dialogue structure with a variety of verbal constructions. Some self-consciously take up the role of meta-discursive gadfly, as cited above, when reformers are challenged to incorporate discussions of poverty as a feature of the complex causes of social problems. Without acknowledgment of poverty, she writes, “you’re just blowing smoke.” Other teachers degraded the authority of reform
language by imputing a kind of plagiarism, as in this utterance: “these perspectives sound eerily similar to the countless failed ‘urban renewal projects’ done in cities over the past sixty years.” Many utterances asserted a destructive combination of dictatorial leadership and incompetence, as illustrated the use of the following phrases:

- “wants total power”
- “system…designed to hold them back”
- “decision makers out of touch”
- “control over our…children”
- “instill their unproven vision”
- “think they know all when they know nothing” (see Appendix).

Varying dissenting stances in these utterances confronted the speech events and roles comprising them.

These constructions go beyond merely contesting reformers’ claims or the consequences reform may have on schools and teachers. Indeed, such phrases assert an active role for teachers and others as eyewitnesses of education. “A growing number of parents, school boards, teachers and civil rights organizations are beginning to question,” writes one urban educator, “the fairness of our overreliance on standardized tests and recently over 300 groups, including the NAACP Legal Defense Fund signed a petition to ask congress to ban the use of such tests.”

Across multiple speakers and web forums, these speakers use layered rhetorical tools that work in concert to redirect negative attention focused on urban education. Their utterances were crafted in conflict-laden environments, and they responded to a variety of speakers and rhetorical challenges. The following section further contextualizes teachers’ efforts to take active roles in education reform debates and considers the role educational research in this domain.

Discussion

Examples of changes in the structure of large-scale social dialogues can be seen throughout recorded history. The rediscovery of classical Greek texts in Europe via Islamic civilizations at the turn of the 1st millennium is an important feature of any study of European civilization. Access to the work of Aristotle and others afforded European participation in discussions of science and philosophy. Some effects of this changed dialogue structure have become part of everyday life. For example, the familiar typographical term “italics” takes its name from the slanted, cramped font that brought editions of classical works of literature, philosophy, and science to the masses in Italy during the late Renaissance. Mass production of such texts fueled significant increases in who could participate in discipline-specific discussions long confined to elite scholars. In parallel example, translations of Judeo-Christian scriptures into languages other than Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin precipitated radical revisions of religious life, evident especially in restructured literacies and interactions between religious authorities and communicants.

The most relevant example of change in large-scale reform dialogue to our discussion would be the formation and growth of teachers’ unions. Unions exert power in part in
relation to the size of their membership. Unions purport to represent the interests of their membership, unifying members to assert collective power. In so doing they speak for individual teachers who ostensibly would have great difficulty being ‘heard.’ In the turmoil of the 1960s, in which the Kerner Commission Report (1968) blamed schools and teachers for contributing to a “racial isolation” (p. 22) membership in the smaller of the two major national U.S. unions rose from 65,000 to over 400,000 (American Federation of Teachers, 2004).

Such changes in dialogue structure may be and have been interpreted in a variety of ways. We do not see emerging dialogue structures or teachers’ active participation as indicative of neat battles between good and evil, freedom and oppression, or democracy and totalitarianism. Graff (1987) and Gee (2014) recognize to the socio-political complexities of literacy in their discussions of Sweden’s Church Law of 1686, which legally mandated that all people, irrespective of class or gender, “learn to read and see with their own eyes what God bids and commands in His Holy Word” (cited in Graff 1987, p. 150). In Sweden, the people might well have been reading and seeing precisely what those in power wanted them to see; however, the ability to read and see on your own opens the door for interpretation as myriad readers join the dialogue. When people become literate, heteroglossia makes having a unilateral discourse much more difficult. The change in the structure of the dialogue reduces the potential that absolute speech will have unchallenged effect.

**Teachers’ Speech Acts & Restructuring Dialogue**

While acquisition of forms of literacy judged to be powerful in a given time and place has often been treated as a means of safeguarded civilization, democracy, and all kinds of notions of progress (Graff, 1979), what we are trying to notice and consider is the lived experience of literacy in the context of the education reform speech community. Ultimately changes in how we communicate can reflect potentially radical changes in human civilization. However, we see these phenomena as more complicated than traditional myths of literacy would have us believe. We noticed rhetorical similarities in union and grassroots teacher activism: Differences are likely to be constructed as conflicts and confrontations, for example. We wonder at the decentralized, varied, and personal flavor of teachers’ online publishing. Framed as a question, what differences matter in teachers’ process of reaching consensus in this altered dialogue format?

The characteristics of the union’s dialogic process seem to favor unity ahead of negotiation with a distinct opponent. With union dialogue providing context in support, we wonder at the iterative process of teachers’ online activism and the role of the Internet in building consensus, destroying consensus (i.e. critiquing the narrative), and otherwise aiding teachers’ efforts to assert themselves in the education reform speech community. Individual teachers’ speech, mediated by the Internet, affords extension and rejoinder through hyperlinking, quotations, memes, remixes, and caricatures. Teachers’ speech acts advance multiple points of view and arguments that suggest an online dialogic collaboration.
Teachers’ use of critical digital literacies to assert a stake in the education reform debate resonate with past reform dialogue structures. We have been extending Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia to the education reform debate in order to understand its emerging structure and its consequences for teachers as civic actors. As we have been talking with teachers and writing about education reform (Authors, 2014; Author A, 2012), we have wrestled with representations of teacher voice in an effort to understand and portray them in dynamic roles. In the process, we have recognized our use of concepts that explain changes in the structure of the education reform debate. We think of these concepts as factors that point to the potential to alter the structure of the speech event:

- Teachers’ online compositions revisit and challenge sanctioned narratives, which is a process Bakhtin framed as bringing authoritative language into live speech to wrest new meaning from it.
- Human struggles are predicted, accomplished, and transformed in, alongside, and through convention-rich forms of speaking. Dissent is possible when people pick up existing speech genres and strategically adapt them.
- The education reform debate gains new voices as teachers seek to muster public support. Teachers’ online compositions resonate with popular education movements word-wide that have relied a bottom-up models of asserting power.

These concepts integrate heteroglossia with the historical characteristics of language to help us interpret the role of discourse in social change. Our approach bears a strong resemblance Bakhtin’s (1984a) study of the modern novel: discourses once controlled by a unitary voice are now sites of struggle among many voices. We are listening to teachers’ voices and attempting to weigh the collateral effect of their voices on the education reform debate. Their efforts to shift blame and attack narratives of school failure purport to establish new dialogue structures that are no longer controlled by a unitary voice. The data presented in this paper suggest how teachers layered themed arguments, rhetorical moves, and word choice as a part of this effort.

**Coda**

The overarching questions for us in this inquiry are historical and political. A deep historical view of education reform counteracts the sway of the contemporary crisis. Historical context strengthens critical awareness of the contemporary calls to action, which often mask hasty and simplified solutions with metaphors that appeal to society’s imagination. Teachers are historicizing education reform and undermining the connection between school-based changes and social progress. As we look at what teachers are doing, we wonder what it means for teachers and others to respond to the manufactured crisis of the now.

Political tensions are intertwined with historical considerations, especially the politics of representation—both for teachers and those who talk about teachers. Teachers have expressed to us their interest in work that speaks with them and perhaps on their behalf. But, we are concerned about the implications of speaking for anyone. We see dangerous and unnecessary political consequences of speaking for those who are actively advocating for themselves as if one’s own advocacy supplanted another. The urban teachers’ whose words we collected were not seeking credentials from literacy
researchers. They were building popular support and independently demonstrating the ability to craft rhetorically sophisticated utterances and use the affordances of digital communication tools. Reports of teacher stress, unhappiness, and attrition can be misperceived as a simple cry for help and justification for the equivalent of helicopter parenting among educational researchers. These same reports can also be framed within a narrative of contemporary U. S. teaching profession as wanting. However, our analysis suggests the opposite: teachers’ utterances function in the civic domain as political dissent in a democratic context. The complex political relationship between teachers and literacy researchers gives opportunity, means, and motivation to perpetuate the notion that teachers are unable to redress their own grievances. This tension drives home a political and moral question: how can literacy researchers work with teachers without taking up paternalistic/maternalistic roles?
References

Authors, (2014).
Strauss, V. (2015, February 7). Teacher tells Congress: ‘We simply cannot ignore the
Appendix. Abbreviated presentation of themed arguments with codes.

Utterances

We fought against this in the civil rights era because the people in charge of educating our kids, the same structure who wants total power now, abused their power back then and failed to properly and equally educate our children.

Where there is money, there is education. Where there isn’t money, there is excessive testing, lack of curricular options, and struggle. There is the struggle to give students the tools they need to fight their way through a system that is designed to hold them back from the moment they take their first breath, from the moment they try to write their first paragraph.

I challenge anyone to spend one week in an inner city school to see what the reality is because the lawmakers and decision makers are out of touch. I challenge anyone to spend one week in an inner city school to see what the reality is because the lawmakers and decision makers are out of touch.

The culprit is the American education system PERIOD. It is a national tragedy that ALL schools are not equal; equal in terms of classes offered, rigor, quality of facilities, books, teachers and support staff. Poor and low-income children are unfairly punished for their socioeconomic circumstances that they have nothing to do with; likewise, wealthier students are rewarded for their socioeconomic circumstances, of which they have nothing to do with. Yet, both sets of students are expected to compete for the same seats in college admission. How does this make sense??? QUALITY EDUCATION must be equal for all students, beginning in pre-K.

It’s not easy for non-white students to “crack down” and succeed in North American schools, because the school system and curriculum is tailored to meet the needs of white, middle class students. Eurocentric curriculum and deficit discourse around non-white students prevails, and I don’t blame certain students for not “buying in” to an education system that undervalues or even condemns their lived experiences.

Finally, High Stakes Testing promotes segregation and stratification. High Stakes Testing allows students to be divided into two camps based on test scores. Those who do not test well find themselves pushed to the side. Since many students of color do not perform well on standardized tests, they are routinely marginalized within the system. More importantly, school closures further penalize those students who most benefit from a broad curriculum but are saddled with testing mandates that jeopardize not only their own future but also the future of the schools they attend.

So what we have is a political and corporate power structure using federal dollars to gain access and control over our black and brown children from the time they enter school until they leave.

The point being: Christie, like every other Republican governor, is scamming the middle- & upper-middle-class taxpayers with the promise of lowering their taxes by privatizing public education for the poor, while raking in campaign monies from for-profit education corporations.

Now, I’m tired of Bloomberg, Black, Gates, Rhee, Whitney Tilson, etc, who think they know all when they know nothing. I am grateful that my husband and I can afford for me to make a career change, as I will almost certainly be taking a pay cut. And I don’t care- the next school year will be my last, and I am so done.

these perspectives sound eerily similar to the countless failed “urban renewal” projects done in cities over the past 60 years — technocrats wanting to demolish what exists and instill their unproven vision of what is best instead of engaging with the people who are already there.

Codes

Failed Mandate

Neoliberal Agenda
If every favorite teacher would disappear tomorrow the whole nation would mourn. If every standardized test disappeared tomorrow... yeah, not so much.

Add into this a standardized test which says every child must acquire the same skills at the same time and you have the recipe for mediocrity and bias.

A growing number of parents, school boards, teachers and civil rights organizations are beginning to question the fairness of our overreliance on standardized tests and recently over 300 groups, including the NAACP Legal Defense Fund signed a petition to ask congress to ban the use of such tests.

Since 2001 public education has been the target of education reformers who believe that more testing especially high stakes testing, and firing teachers based on test scores is what low-income, minority, and special needs children need to succeed.

Teachers are Evaluated Based on Student Test Scores. This is ridiculously inaccurate and unfair. Standardized tests do NOT effectively measure student learning. They measure family income. So teachers who have richer students have generally more favorable evaluations than those who teach the poorest and most difficult children. Value-Added Measures, as these are often called, have been labeled junk science by national statistical organizations. They violate a basic principle of the field that you cannot use a test designed to evaluate one factor as a way to evaluate an entirely different factor. Removing due process would make the teachers who serve the most at-risk students, themselves, unfairly at risk of losing their jobs.

Teaching in the inner city is an entirely different animal. I've seen teachers injured by first and second graders, cursed at, chased around the room. And this is acceptable, because the children are not receiving the help they need right away, and teachers are not trained or supported to handle these children, and administrators usually don’t want to be bothered.

As a teacher, I have seen huge changes in the past 20 years. Kids are having kids and raising them with little or no parenting skills. Those kids are growing up in chaos and they are coming to school not able to think about education... they are too worried about mama's new boyfriend, or drugs, or gangs, or neighborhood violence, or poverty, or a million other aspects of life in the inner city. Who the hell cares about math and reading when you’ve got the kind of problems most people can’t even imagine? Teachers can only do so much. We are constantly trying to learn the best way to teach these kids, and it’s tough. They often come from parents who see teachers as the enemy, because they didn’t have good experiences in school.

If you've ever tried to work as a teacher in a predominantly minority high school ANYWHERE, in or out of the city, you'd know. It is impossible to teach anybody anything there. Everybody acts like you're committing a crime against humanity by trying to teach math.

What I hear in this story though is a lot of miscommunication or no communication. Not all the students are disruptive; not all the parents show up to fight in public; surely not every administrator in the district is ineffective--so what's the rest of the story?

It is a false idea that the teachers drive the students’ learning based solely upon standardized test scores. I have been a Highly Effective teacher in several schools and a very Ineffective teacher in two high schools that have failed for years before I arrived and will continue to fail long after I depart. Districts have tried placing their Highly Qualified and Highly Effective teachers in their lowest performing schools as measured by standardized test scores. It did not work. The students’ poor performance on standardized tests are linked more to high absentee rates than teaching abilities. In my district, teachers in the poorest performing schools are now being evaluated on student behavior and attendance. However, the students who fail to come to school have the lowest standardized test scores in the state. It is very difficult to teach someone who does not come to school.

In the U.S., if you can believe it, approximately 1.3 million students were homeless during the 2012-2013 year. How can a child learn if he or she is homeless or hungry? It is time to invest in our kids--who are the future of this country. We don’t need huge tax breaks for billionaires and large corporations. We need to end child poverty.