Collage Dialogue Assignments: A Tool for Shaping Reading

The collage dialogue assignment has been used for teaching various courses. This handout includes revised excerpts from an assignment handout English 596: The History of Rhetoric (Fall 1996-SIU-C). Contributors: David Blakesley; William Covino; and Joyce Walker.

Sample Assignment

The Collage Dialogue is an effort to compose what has been called a "verbatim patchwork" that represents a cast of speakers discussing a theoretical issue or term that has either arisen in class discussion or in your reading. Writing such a dialogue requires attuning yourself to the complexities of an issue. While the purpose of conventional, formalistic writing in college is often to settle an issue (or perhaps to stop thinking about something), the purpose of the dialogue is to open an issue and to keep the process of wondering and invention alive. Writing this kind of dialogue requires that you practice the rhetorician's art of knowing the many sides of an issue, that you master the art of rhetorical invention. In a well-known passage from The Philosophy of Literary Form, Kenneth Burke provides a powerful anecdote describing the "unending conversation" going on at the point in history when we are born. He expresses nicely the polyphonic nature of our participation in the drama of human relations:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending on the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (110-11)

Writing the Collage Dialogue

The Process:

Your sources can be from both printed and online materials. You should have anywhere from 10-15 sources and at least 5 of these should be from print-based materials. Using all of your source material you will create a dialogue--a conversation between the experts and your invented characters, which thoroughly discusses the issues, bringing forward as many perspectives on the issue as possible.

Voices for Your Dialogue:

**Experts:** Select at least 7 experts on your topic, each with a different viewpoint. These are real experts who have published material on the topic. You will be using their actual words in your dialogue, so you must have specific published sources from this expert available to you. [NOTE: Experts speak only through the quotes you've gathered from the text, but minimal bracketed text can be added for flow of conversation.]

**Characters:** Additional speakers might serve as moderators or commentators--real or imagined--who steer the dialogue in alternative directions, point out areas of disagreement and consensus, offer opposing views, or help orient the reader in ways the experts do not. The quotes for these characters will be entirely invented by you.

**Conglomerate Characters:** These are characters which are developed from EXPERT (i.e. published) sources. In some cases you may find that you have a position you wish to articulate which no SINGLE expert source covers. In this case you may want to create an imaginary character (who must be described in your introduction!) who uses several sources to make statements about the issue. The sources must be cited correctly in the text and all of the sources for the character must be cited in your Works Cited.

**Avatars:** In some cases you may be using materials from a website (e.g. a corporate page or a medical site) which has no stated author and yet presents a "unified" perspective on an issue. In this case you may want to develop a character (give him or her a name and title) who represents the site. Be sure, however, to introduce this character as an Avatar in your introduction --you will need to make the point that this is an INVENTED person whose quotes are nevertheless developed from a single site.
Procedure for Writing the Dialogue:
1. Create a Cast of Characters which lists all Experts, Characters, Group Members, Conglomerates and Avatars. Identify each cast member (you may also want to include a brief description of his/her/its role in the dialogue).
2. Introduce the setting of your discussion. This can be very brief, but you should create a physical location for this conversation.
3. Published sources should be cited in the text following standard MLA format. You should include a list of works cited at the end of the dialogue.
4. Make every attempt to reproduce the expert's published views verbatim. Occasionally, you will need to include bracketed words [ ] to help maintain coherence. You may also use ellipses for the purpose of leaving out material that is not essential to the dialogue.
5. Respect the context of the expert's published words (in other words, if you decide to "add text" to make a speaker/writer's ideas more clear, make sure you do so in a way which is consistent with the "voice" of the speaker/writer in the published work you've read.

Constraints:
No one makes uncharacteristic statements. No one wins. That is, no one view should dominate any other. Characters should be given roughly equal time.

Criteria for this Project:
The primary criterion for this assignment is your ability to engage in a dialogue with the competing voices relating to your topic. If you can't create a fairly balanced dialogue (based on your own, group members, and expert's words), then you haven't done enough research. Other criteria for the project are: Technical correctness (following the directions of the assignment sheet, for example), including such issues as faithful reproduction of the texts you are using, correct punctuation of both quotations and invented text, and proper MLA citations. Sufficient length to create a balanced and developed view of your issue (let's say 5 or 6 pages). Inclusion of a correct and complete Works Cited page (bibliography). A creative/inventive use of your fictional characters. A creative/inventive style that combines quotes effectively to create the illusion of real dialogue. This is a central issue and will be weighted heavily.

A Sample Collage Dialogue

A Conversation On Literacy

Cast of Characters: N1: a character who wants to believe there are answers and that someone else can provide them, a conciliatory voice; N2: a character who asks more difficult questions; and the EXPERTS: E.D. Hirsch, Howard Gardner, Murray & Rosalie Wax, Kathryn Flannery, Nancy Larrick, Mike Rose, Stanley Aronowitz & Henry A. Giroux, Antonio Gramsci, Frank Smith, and Paulo Friere

The Collage Dialogue

N1: Being a novice composition teacher, I'd like to ask some of you to give me your point of view on some of the problems with our education system.

N2: For example, why are so many Americans illiterate, in spite of programs like Project Literacy?

E.D. Hirsch: The decline of American literacy and the fragmentation of the American school curriculum have been chiefly caused by the ever growing dominance of romantic formalism in educational theory during the past half century (110).

Frank Smith: [The real problem in education is] Programmatic instruction - where someone outside the classroom who cannot see either learners or teachers decides what the teacher should do next - [which] has never been successful beyond its own prescribed and limited objectives. The programs could never live up to their extravagant labels or advertising (Insult to Intelligence 69).

N2: I'm confused already. Can you tell me what romantic formalism is? Why is it a problem?

E.D. Hirsch: Educational formalism assumes that the specific contents used to teach "language arts" do not matter so long as they are closely tied to what the child already knows, but this developmental approach ignores ... [the] important point that different children know different things (112).

N1: So specific content is important?
E.D. Hirsch: [Yes, I believe there is an] extensive network of associations [which should constitute a] part of the [school] curriculum that has to be known by every child and must be common to all the schools of the nation (128).

N2: That would be the information on your "lists" of what every 1st grader, 2nd grader, etc. needs to know?

E.D. Hirsch: [Yes. This] extensive curriculum ... [will help to break] the cycle of illiteracy for deprived children; rais[el the living standards of families who have been illiterate; mak[el our country more competitive in international markets; achiev[e greater social justice; enabl[e all citizens to participate in the political process; bring us closer to the Ciceronian ideal of universal public discourse - in short [it will help] achiev[e the] fundamental goals of the Founders at the birth of the republic (145).

Frank Smith: Literacy is talked of as 'the golden key' to everything from full employment and a reduced crime rate to the treasure of world literature and culture. [But the fact is.] Literacy doesn't make anyone a better person ("Overselling Literacy" 354).

N2: So then why are we so worried about whether our children are literate?

Frank Smith: A common rationale is that ... "minimum competencies" will ensure that, at the least, children have the experience required for any subsequent employment they might be able to find...Larry Mikulecky of Indiana University compared the reading done by forty-eight high school juniors and fifty-one adult technical school students with 150 workers from a variety of occupations "ranging from blue collar to professional/technical." He found little similarity. He reported: "Results suggest that students read less often in school than most workers do on the job, that they read less competently, face easier material which they read to less depth, and that the strategies students employ may be less effective than those employed by the workers." So much for training students for the workplace (Insult to Intelligence 65).

E.D. Hirsch: [But] why have we failed to give [these students] the information they lack? Chiefly because of educational formalism, which encourages us to ignore the fact that identifying and imparting the information a child Is missing is most important in the earliest grades, when the task is most manageable (111).

Frank Smith: Children can't learn anything worthwhile one fragmented trivialized, and decontextualized bit at a time (Insult to Intelligence 84).

E.D. Hirsch: [I don't believe that's true.] Young children are fascinated by straight-forward information and absorb it without strain (131). Even untraditional schools have not found a way to avoid rote learning of the alphabet or the multiplication table or the months of the year. Children don't have to be forced to memorize facts; they do it anyway (131).

N1: Well, we all remember things from our childhood, like Schoolhouse Rock: "We the people..." But is that the sort of learning you are talking about? And besides, is whether we learn by fact or by storytelling really so important?

Nancy Larrick: It is interesting to note that the first great literacy campaign of modern times was directed by Martin Luther in the 16th century. The reading materials he offered came from his own very rhythmical translation of the Bible, as well as from the hymns that he wrote and for which he composed the music (226).

Kathryn Flannery: ...if we are really interested in ... putting Outsiders more generally in a position to acquire literacy... we cannot ignore the "cultural ecology" of schooling. In other words, we cannot expect to change much by simply reinforcing "traditional" curricular content (93).

N1: But I thought that was what we really needed to do, "get back to the basics."

Frank Smith: In place of major objectives, many state and local school administrations now look for the achievement of "minimum competencies." These are also known and "the basics" and, occasionally, "survival skills." Minimum competencies refer to such attainments as sufficient reading and writing ability to study the "Situation Vacant" column and to compose a job application. Sufficient math to total a fast-food order and complete a tax return (Insult to Intelligence 54).

N2: So you're saying that the basics aren't good enough?

Frank Smith: [I'm saying that we] underrate our brains and our intelligence. Formal education has become such a complicated, self-conscious and over-regulated activity that learning is widely regarded as something difficult that the brain would rather not do (Insult to Intelligence 18).

N2: Well, how do you propose to change that? How would you make learning less difficult?

Frank Smith: The brain is a highly efficient learning device, but only when it is actively making sense of something, not when it is consciously striving to assimilate facts. Rote learning, the deliberate effort to
memorize unrelated items of information, is so difficult and inefficient as to be clearly unnatural, the brain's least preferred way of learning ("A Metaphor for Literacy" [24]).

Mike Rose: [When Literacy... is severed from the imagination... is it any wonder that so many see school... as a source of consternation, as tedious and dulling, as a rebuff rather than an invitation?] (212).

N2: It seems to me that improving a child's chances for an education requires more than just making learning "inviting." What kind of reform in the classroom would you suggest to encourage imaginative learning?

Kathryn Flannery: [What we need is] courses designed to break down the separation between "acceptable" traditional knowledge, between the teacher as controller and chief judge of acceptable knowledge (as priest of the word) and the student as empty vessel (as novice), between creators of knowledge and receivers of knowledge... courses that create the possibility for change (98).

[This dialogue continues for several pages and ends with a reference list.]

Some Possibilities for the Collage Dialogue

The process of creating a collage of different voices related to an issue, concept, or theme can be used for a variety of writing instruction purposes, from more simple assignments designed to showcase a student's grasp of material to more complicated assignments designed to explore the connections and fault lines which might exist in published material (or in the students' own thinking). The following list represents only a sample of possible uses for the collage dialogue:

1. **As a large research assignment on a particular topic or theme**
   In this instance the assignment is designed to allow students to explore a topic fully—to make connections and consider the implications of various stances on an issue, as well as to insert their own perspective on the topic.

2. **As an introductory assignment designed to precede a large research project**
   In this case the dialogue would be a way of exploring the controversies or interesting discussions surrounding a topic, and also a way of evaluating the sources which have been collected for a larger research paper.

3. **As part of group work on readings for a thematic course**
   Here the collage dialogue would encourage discussion among the members of a reading group about the issues related to a specific set of texts. Variations for a group focus would need to address the accommodation of the diverse voices of the group members, as well as the differences/controversies among the "expert" voices. Additionally, the criteria for the essay might change if the focus was to assist students in their understanding of materials rather than to assess their ability to manipulate/combine/connect their sources.

4. **As a collectively produced web site.**
   Here students would be asked to build a chat largely out of quotes from sources. The site could be constructed by a group to display a particular debate or built improvisationally as students are challenged to find relevant responses in effect to other students' (quoted) contributions.

5. **As a substitute for a "take-home" essay exam**
   The collage dialogue might be useful as a way to assess a student's reading of the material for a semester long course. This would be particularly useful if the readings for the course involve a unified theme and if the students have not been asked to use class discussions in their other written work.

6. **As an ongoing process of evaluation and synthesis of materials**
   If the goal of structuring the dialogue to resemble a "true" conversation is relaxed, the collage process might be used as a way to encourage students to select and reflect on aspects of reading material they find challenging or controversial. In a semester-long assignment of this kind, the students might have more freedom to reflect on or challenge the material—or to elaborate on the "expert" sources with their own ideas and connections. The collage dialogue might resemble a kind of "commonplace book."

Collage Dialogues might be used to help students learn to:

- find and understand reading materials,
- make connections between diverse stances on an issue,
- create a document that reads like a coherent conversation,
- add to or challenge existing perspectives on an issue, and
- negotiate (with sources or with group members) complicated processes for producing knowledge.