Saying and Silence: Listening to Composition with Bakhtin


In Saying and Silence, Frank Farmer writes from the perspective of an experienced teacher as well as accomplished scholar. Having taught in a number of public schools and universities, Farmer rarely loses sight of the classroom—why the theories he explores might matter for students and teachers alike. Drawing on his own work as a classroom teacher, Farmer, throughout this volume, seeks to link pedagogical decisions to broader theoretical questions, including those addressed in his own previous work on writing and composition. Farmer edited, for example, the influential volume Landmark Essays on Bakhtin, Rhetoric and Writing.

While some chapters will inevitably speak more directly than others to the interests of individual readers (dealing variously with classroom, academic, and social issues), I believe that each ultimately addresses questions that profoundly affect any of us involved in the teaching of English. What do we mean by “voice” in writing, and how might we guide students to explore it meaningfully when they read and write? How could “imitation” be reconceived in writing instruction by thinking in terms of dialogue? Above all, how can Bakhtin’s theories help us to think in new ways, maybe even more deeply, about how we teach writing?

Farmer prefaces the collection by confiding that each essay represents a sort of turning point in his own thinking: “those occasions when I have seen fit to change my mind about some aspect or consequence of Bakhtin’s thought” (ix). Introducing the volume, Farmer summarizes a number of central concerns such as “whether voice can be taught and whether imitation should be” (8). More generally, Farmer tells us, he means to explore the relationship of speech to silence, “especially as this relationship emerges in our classrooms . . . how it is that we and our students, colleagues, and critics have our say, speak our piece, often under conditions where silence is institutionally sanctioned” (4). He is also keenly concerned with issues of authority in the classroom, and how our choice of specific teaching practices can effectively silence students or, alternatively, inspire them to write in more genuine and personally meaningful ways (akin to what Bakhtin terms internally persuasive discourse).

Chapters on voice and imitation are likely to be of particular interest to many writing teachers. Voice is a central concept in Bakhtinian thought, of course, and one that intersects with other definitions of the term, such as those associated with expressivist views. Farmer concludes, “Those who champion rhetoric of expression tend to overlook the crucial roles that other voices play in constructing [one's voice]” (57). Rather than being primarily personal or unique, then, voice in writing is seen as socially situated.

Not settling for theory alone, Farmer strives to provide a compelling bridge to practice. After considering developmental, rhetorical, and historical “senses” of voice, Farmer turns to related classroom practices, specifically, (1) how teacher response to student writing, such as in the “writing conference,” can emphasize the dialogical nature of voice; (2) how familiar techniques such as dialogue journals might be reconceptualized; and (3) how writing assignments can engage students dialogically, even intertextually, with what they have read (he illustrates with reference to the oft taught “Letter from the Birmingham Jail” by Martin Luther King, Jr.). Ultimately, Farmer aims at “teaching students to listen for diverse voices at large in the texts we ask them to read...[and] the possibility of writing in and through those voices, of making such voices their own” (71).

The essay on imitation begins with a necessary concession: such repetitive techniques have been generally discredited in composition circles. Exercises involving slavish imitation long ago gave way to expressivist and process pedagogies. Farmer argues, however, that while traditional imitative strategies (e.g., sentence combining and Christensen's New Rhetoric) were typically rigid and restrictive, Bakhtinian theory seems to offer some interesting dialogical alternatives.

Here Farmer's argument hinges, once again, on Bakhtin's analysis of voice. Specifically, written texts (such as the novel) and oral language (such as conversation) both entail appropriation: representing the words of others. Both spoken and written language can still be "one's own," even when laden with such appropriation—what Bakhtin refers to as dual-voicing. (Readers interested in the intricacies of Bakhtinian theory with regard to dual-voicing, including distinctions such as active/passive and directionality, will find a good discussion here.)

Farmer acknowledges that while Bakhtin is “far more interested in those representations of another's language that require two or more voices” (85), imitation—if it were to be viewed dialogically—might prove more useful pedagogically. Bakhtin’s concept of dual-
voicing challenges us to rethink the nature of imitation and move beyond restrictive exercises to define imitation in a way devoid of dialogue. By fundamentally redefining the nature of imitation, Farmer believes, we increase its value to writing instruction. Interestingly, he refrains from becoming prescriptive, leaving it to readers to imagine for themselves the forms that “dialogic imitation” might take in any particular context—as if challenging each of us to conceive of such an approach in our own ways.

Yet while he does not provide specific examples, the call to action is clear, and a theoretical framework is carefully articulated here. This chapter is indicative, I think, of the author’s willingness to go out on a limb, to stand the chance of moving “disciplinary conversations” among writing teachers and composition theorists forward in productive and provocative ways.

Reading Frank Farmer’s *Saying and Silence*, I am reminded of listening to student-led discussion over the years, and particularly to one class grappling with *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* at El Cerrito High School in California. Students in Joan Cone’s classroom were coming to terms with the way Malcolm X, throughout the course of his life, had revised his views, sometimes in dramatic ways. Where some might see vacillation or even contradiction, they found virtue—a flexibility that a number attempted consciously to emulate when they spoke and wrote themselves. The students likened such transformations to their own as adolescents in a pluralistic society sorting out their own beliefs and, indeed, a sense of self. Earlier that year, Cone had introduced Montaigne and the origins of the modern essay. At the heart of this essay tradition is a willingness to reexamine—and revise—one’s way of thinking, to enter into dialogue with the ideas of others: in essence, to reinvent oneself. This willingness to rethink things seemed to many of these students a benchmark of credibility. Such negotiation of perspectives and beliefs is precisely the sort of dialogue that the essays in Farmer’s book contemplate and at moments even seem to model.

“In our class discussion, in our assignments, in our responses to student work, as well as in every other aspect of our pedagogies,” he suggests, “we pitch camp on boundaries, for there and only there are we able to meet our twin obligations to mutual inquiry, to dialogue, and to the critique of how popular forms undermine existing power relations” (148). This book is important because it recontextualizes such dialogic classroom practices, sensitive to the diverse voices of students and, in light of Bakhtin, a theory that might guide us toward such ideals.

**Christian Knouller**, formerly a high school English teacher, serves on the faculty of the English Department at Purdue University in Indiana.

---

**Lighting Fires: How the Passionate Teacher Engages Adolescent Writers**


How do we motivate students to write? Joseph Tsujimoto’s *Lighting Fires: How the Passionate Teacher Engages Adolescent Writers* offers a view of how one teacher channels students’ imaginations and creativity through meaningful writing exercises, providing students with countless opportunities to improve their craft.

Much of the book is organized into chapters on different genres of writing. For each genre, the author includes examples of his own work, his students’ work, and writings by published authors. He provides examples of the handouts he supplies students for writing in these genres. For several genres, he outlines his daily routine.

Throughout the book, the author illustrates how purposeful instructional techniques and strategies can cultivate an environment that allows students to write without fear of embarrassment, one that encourages reflection and sharing among all students in the class.

He creates a classroom community that encourages team effort at revision.

*It doesn’t matter that not a single suggestion offered to you is superior to what you already have. All you ask is that the suggestion be different from what you already have so that you have a basis for comparison. What you want is lots of suggestions for lots of different people.* (56)

The first chapter details the author’s background and experiences as a teacher of writing, his involvement with the National Writing Project (NWP), and the forces that helped shape him into the passionate teacher he has become. He recounts how National Writing Project founder Jim Gray asked him to deliver the keynote address at the 1989 NWP Annual Meeting. The speech was well received, but in planning his talk, Tsujimoto had his doubts, wondering if “some of the things I have to say would seem contrary to the current ideas favoring a student-centered classroom.”

As the title of his book suggests Tsujimoto does spotlight the central role of the “passionate teacher.”