Listening In is the story of Thomas Newkirk’s weekly visits to Patricia McLure’s first and second grade classroom to observe and listen as students discussed books. McLure, a veteran teacher of twenty-four years with whom Donald Graves and others have conducted collaborative research, annotated and responded to Newkirk’s transcripts of the weekly book discussions he audio taped. According to Newkirk, McLure “would answer my questions, make observations about the response styles of students, describe decisions she made, or show how the discussion fit into other parts of the school day” (p. 5). Evidence of this fruitful collaboration is clear throughout the book as Newkirk discusses how his own initial impressions of student talk were transformed through discussions with McLure.

Newkirk notes, for instance, that he often felt like intervening during book discussions that strayed from the topic long before McLure did. When he asked McLure how she remained so patient during the discussions, she told him, “I don’t think of it as patient. I’m interested in what they say” (p. 149). Newkirk then began to realize that for McLure the personal stories children told when they talked about books were not a means to some greater literary end, but “the scene where relationships were worked out” (p. 150).

Newkirk weaves a compelling tale, illustrating his points with examples from literature, from history, and, most prominently, from his own experience. He opens several chapters with a story about his family, embodying in his writing of this tale what he celebrates in McLure’s teaching, a belief that important conversations often open out into the social world before pulling in closer to the text under discussion.

Newkirk’s is a tale with many lessons, most of them about challenging dogma. We learn, for instance, that it is not always personal schemas that activate the reading of texts, as recent reading theory would have it, but that, instead, texts often activate personal schemas: “story types that enabled the children to tell their own stories” (p. 89). In McLure’s class, story was not used merely in the service of comprehension, but seen as central to the collaborative work of these learners. Most importantly, perhaps, Newkirk’s book challenges the assumption that “off-topic” classroom talk is to be either discouraged or ignored. He makes it clear that talk which does not relate directly to the texts under discussion is nevertheless a critical component of children’s literary response and social development.

Newkirk discusses three categories of children’s literary response in this classroom: testing word knowledge; testing psychological realism; and testing textual realism. In all of these responses, the children tested their own “childlike” logic against their growing sense of how the world works, questioning, for instance, whether spiders can really talk or
whether a student would really
dare to dream in school on the
first day of the year. The
children’s conversations, ex-
cerpted throughout the book,
illustrate his central point that
educators need to reconsider the
meaning of “off-topic” talk. For
instance, in the following con-
versation about a character’s wish to
receive one of Santa’s bells for
Christmas in The Polar Express
(Van Allsburg, 1985), the children
used what might ordinarily be
considered irrelevant talk to
reflect on issues of textual realism
(p. 77):

Phillip: I know what I would want if
I was that boy.

Jimmy: What?

Phillip: A New Kids on the Block
tape.

Jimmy: Hmmm. New Kids on the
Block I don’t think were even born
then.

Phillip: I think they were maybe five
or six years old then.

Abby: Then why would they be
singing, Phillip?

Jimmy: They’d be as old as he would.

Phillip: Maybe little babies.

“Child culture,” Newkirk argues,
differs from “adult/teacher
culture.” In taking this position,
Newkirk continues to explore the
dialectical relationship between
social and developmental learning
that emerged in his earlier book,
More than Stories: The Range of
Children’s Writing (1989, p. 32):

We must understand that individu-
als are distinctive, with particular
abilities and interests, living out
their lives in environments that are
also unique, yet we must also act
upon general understandings of
human behavior and growth...

Listening In describes how the
“uniqueness” of McClure’s class-
room created a particular social
environment which placed much
value on collaboration. In addi-
tion to the social dimensions of
their talk, however, Newkirk
believes the children’s talk also
reflects their development as six
and seven year olds.

Newkirk’s use of the word
“culture” in describing this
developmental stage is problem-
atic, however, if we take culture to
mean shared standards for belief,
action, and evaluation of others
(e.g. Goodenough, 1971). One
cannot point to a monolithic
“child culture” within a classroom
for several reasons. First, shared,
only implicit standards are co-
produced by a teacher and her
students and so must represent
the beliefs of the teacher at least as
strongly as they do those of the
students; second, even if “child
culture” could be separated from
the influence of adults in the
classroom, the varied cultures
which constitute the beliefs and
actions of each child suggest that
meaning within the classroom
must be built discursively within
and against competing, rather
than monolithic, interests.

Despite the seemingly homog-
 enous “white, middle class,
semirural” (p. 9) constitution of
this class, differences in gender,
age, ability, and status shape the
nature of response and collabora-
tion in any classroom. Early in the
book, Newkirk reports that he
shared a transcript with a friend
who noted that a girl was quickly
silenced as boys took over the
conversation. But the issue isn’t
explored here. While differential
status among students need not
be examined in every book about
classroom discussion, it does
seem particularly relevant to an
argument that seeks to endorse a
“child culture” view of the
classroom.

The intersection between social
and developmental views of
children’s talk and cognition may
be more aptly described by Daiute
(1993, p. 406) as “youth genre,”
which is “a kind of speech genre
influenced by children’s status as
children and by their interactions
with other children.” This concept
is more in keeping with
Newkirk’s reference to Erving
Goffman’s “underlife” role, the
subtly subversive role performed
when behavior is regulated and
there is a desire to be “more than
the role assigned” (p. 41). The
children in McClure’s class create
an underlife that can be described
as its own “genre” without
overly challenging the larger
classroom community.

Newkirk refers to Listening In as a
“story” (xii). Because his work is
often about the nature of story—
in research, literary response, or
writing development—it’s
important to consider Newkirk’s
account of McClure’s classroom
in light of what he has written in the
past about narrative inquiry. In
“The Narrative Roots of Case

THE QUARTERLY 27
Study" (1992), Newkirk explains that "the case study researcher usually tells transformative narratives" (p. 134) that have mythic qualities. My reading of the mythic nature of this narrative centers on the transformative power of McLure. We see this power in her quiet wisdom, in her unassuming authority, and in her gentle prodding of Newkirk, primarily, and her students, secondarily. Through Newkirk's story, she becomes the teacher as Zen guide, "leading from behind" (Newman, 1985, p. 5). While Newkirk includes reservations other teachers might have about McLure's approach, he never questions the source of his own transformative experience.

Newkirk uses this representation of McLure to critique the transmission versus process binary, claiming that McLure rejected both the charismatic role of the teacher associated with a transmission model and the merely facilitative role associated with process writing classrooms. McLure appears to be a gifted teacher, one whose actions are governed by carefully examined beliefs, which, according to Newkirk, "can be revealed but not abstractly defined" (p. 117).

However, my take on this story about McLure's classroom has been colored by Newkirk's article "Narrative Roots," in which he suggests the need to disrupt comfortable readings of narratives (p. 148):

For without some form of resistance, either in the construction of the text or in the act of reading, it is difficult to see how readers can avoid the seductiveness of deeply rooted and deeply satisfying narratives that place us in familiar moral positions.

As a reader of Listening In, I find it difficult to resist the satisfying narrative Newkirk has created because he denies readers a sense of the constructed nature of his story, what Connelly and Clandinin (1990 p. 5) call an "active reconstruction of the events." In fact, he announces in his forward that his intention is to tell the story directly, citing as few references as possible, even those important to his interpretive frame. Newkirk briefly interrupts his story to reflect on early stages of data analysis, describing them as "false starts" (p. 5), but he uses these initial interpretations to critique a common view of children's classroom talk as internalization of adult modeling. He claims to resist the temptation to idealize the children's talk, preferring instead to learn from the ordinary. Indeed, the children's talk is not idealized, but one might argue that the teacher's is. While such seamless stories have a certain appeal, they may also lead to "narrative smoothing" (Connelly and Clandinin, p. 10), a sense of completeness that fails to signal for readers the possible existence of alternative stories.

Despite these reservations, I found Listening In to be a gratifying story about a classroom where children use talk simultaneously for social and academic pur-

poses—a class where the social and the academic fuse to create an environment responsive to children's ways of thinking and interacting. Newkirk's writing blends observation with experience and reflection, resulting in a richly rendered account of McLure's classroom that will be of significance to all those who work with teachers and students.

References


Cynthia Lewis is completing her doctorate in reading at the University of Iowa, where her research focuses upon the sociocultural dimensions of literature discussions. She will become a faculty member of Grinnell College in August 1994.
Books

Empowering Education

by Ira Shor
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992

Reviewed by Patricia Austin

The reader has only to take in the title, Empowering Education, and to study the book jacket to get an inkling of what is in store. A small picture on the cover shows two hands reaching up against the background of a barren landscape. Above the image of the hands are several open books, appearing not just as open books, however, but looking like birds with wings outstretched. This image presents a visual metaphor for what Shor wants to express, "knowledge [as] power to know, to understand but not necessarily the power to do or to change ... Knowledge is power only for those who can use it to change their conditions" (Shor, 1992, p.6). Shor wants to convey the notion of knowledge not as a commodity to impose on students but rather as a problem posed to them for mutual inquiry toward social change.

Through theorizing and through discussing examples of Paulo Freire's situated pedagogy with peasants in Brazil and of his own situated pedagogy with his students at the City University of New York, Shor portrays the teacher as "the person who mediates the relationship between outside authorities, formal knowledge, and individual students" (p.13). He proposes and details an agenda of values for accomplishing an empowering education — describing it as participatory, affective, problem posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, desocializing, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary, and activist.

The empowering teacher never views students as deficient but rather as members of diverse cultures with rich language and experience. The teacher's responsibility is to use the students' thought and language to understand experience and to generate a theme whose study provokes them as a community to examine the very nature of the subject matter they're engaged in. Central to the problem posing methodology that Shor embraces is dialogue — dialogue by which the teacher probes students to clarify, connect, and differentiate. Shor contrasts his methodology to "transfer lectures," the pedagogy characterized by teachers doing most of the talking that is so prevalent in mass schooling. The functions of the teacher who leads and models dialogue are to synthesize what students are saying, to focus issues, and to frame questions. Good synthesis moves the process to the next level of inquiry. Weak synthesis only further encourages students' resistance to respond; and it is this resistance for which Shor has developed a methodology to overcome.

Within problem posing and dialogue, another means for a teacher to move students beyond
resistance is to desocialize them from dominant influence. Desocialization is a process that enables learners to see the fallacy of the traditional notion of a good student as one who answers questions rather than questioning answers. The goal of such dialogic inquiry is egalitarian democracy. Democratic teachers need to begin a course by discussing how students see course matter and by generating questions that they have about it. In brief, Shor sees that students “should experience relevance, subjectivity and provocative debates in an area, not orthodoxies of information” (p. 145).

What follows the discussion of values is an oddly directive litany of ideas to initiate this approach in various courses at various grade levels. While probably intended to be trigger points to spur the reader’s imagination along similar lines, the suggestions Shor offers have a recipe-like ring not resonant with the philosophy propounded in the book. Shor faces, to be sure, a difficult dilemma and seemingly wants to provide the link from description of what he does in his classes to generalize what classes look like and feel like that operate according to the agenda of values that he details. In so doing, however, he negates the generative nature of activities that must characterize what it is that teachers and students do in the truly democratic class.

Similarly, in suggesting many activist agendas that teachers in different disciplines can explore with students, Shor implies two things — that teachers impose these agendas and that these issues are ones that students will care about. The leap he makes about involving students in their learning is a large one. When the agenda is that of the teacher, students often resist. He does address that resistance, however, and acknowledges that students cannot be commanded but rather must be invited to think and act on critical problems.

Also, in creating a practical bridge from theory to practice (and this time more successfully) Shor discusses the processes of testing, grading, and evaluation. He recommends “thinking” examinations in which students before the fact debate and choose critical questions for tests. He also recommends negotiation and contracts, discussing the issues with insightful clarity. The structures he puts in place in his classes are truly student centered but not permissive or self centered. Though a seeming oxymoron, he states that democratic classes must maintain high standards.

In the final chapter of the book, Shor makes a statement that serves as a disclaimer for previous chapters that have appeared prescriptive. “It is helpful to report experiences or [problem posing dialogue, to see how it has worked in the classroom, with the caution that a report is not a prescription for the only way to do it.” He enumerates phases that help him as an educator focus on dialogic practices and describes the “the third idiom,” a term he assigns to the transformative discourse that teachers and students must invent to break down unequal power relations between them. Since relatively few readers have the experience of dialogic inquiry, the report is a valuable one. Description of his own teaching, rather than projected ideas for other disciplines, would have been testimony enough, however, that teachers can empower learners.

Despite these caveats, this book is a powerful one and a must read for all educators deeply concerned with empowering education.

Patricia Austin is an assistant professor of education at Tulane University and is coordinator of the Pathways to Teaching Program. She also teaches writing at the SPARKLE program at the University of New Orleans.