Promoting Social Imagination Through Interior Monologues

By Bill Bigelow and Linda Christensen

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT AIMS of teaching is to prompt students to empathize with other human beings. This is no easy accomplishment in a society that pits people against each other, offers vastly greater or lesser amounts of privileges based on accidents of birth, and rewards exploitation with wealth and power.

Empathy, or "social imagination," as Peter Johnson calls it in *The Reading Teacher,* allows students to connect to "the other" with whom, on the surface, they may appear to have little in common. A social imagination encourages students to construct a more profound "we" than daily life ordinarily permits. A social imagination prompts students to wonder about the social contexts that provoke hurtful behaviors, rather than simply to dismiss individuals as inherently "evil" or "greedy."

One teaching method we use to promote empathy, and return to unit after unit, is the interior monologue. An interior monologue is simply the imagined thoughts of a character in history, literature, or life at a specific point in time. After watching a film, reading a novel,

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Interior monologues help students explore the experience of people whose lives are different from theirs, such as these African American workers who came north in the Great Migration of 1918.

short story, or essay, or performing improvisation skits, the class brainstorms particular key moments, turning points, or critical passages characters confronted. During a unit on the Vietnam War, we watch the documentary *Hearts and Minds*. The film weaves interviews with U.S. soldiers and Vietnamese with newsreel footage of the war and unexpected scenes of daily life in the United States. Student suggestions included writing from the points of view of an American pilot who has become critical of his role in the war, a North Vietnamese man whose entire family has been killed in a bombing raid, and a Native American Marine who was called "blanket ass" and "squaw" by commanding officers.

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The monologue technique gives structure to the assignment, but the freedom to write from anyone's point of view allows students to mold the piece to the contours of their lives and interests. Jetta chose the point of view of a Vietnamese prostitute, and wrote in part:

> *I sell my body because it's the only way to stay alive. They say my people are disgraceful, but they have disgraced us. … We are forced to sell our bodies. … but who forces them to pay, to strip the dignity from someone's daughter? Do they not have daughters at home? Do they not have mothers? Where did they learn this? What kind of place teaches this?*

In our classroom circle, students read their pieces aloud and give positive comments on each other's work. Listening to the collection of writings offers students an intimate portrait of the social consequences of the war. We feel, rather than observe from a distance. These portraits provide us a way to talk about the film without writing out typical discussion questions. The different lives that students imagine and their different interpretations give us opportunities to explore the film or reading more thoroughly.

As is true any time we wonder about other people's lives, our monologues are only guesses, at times marred by stereotype. But the very act of considering, "How might this person experience this situation?" develops an important "habit of the mind" and draws us closer together. We write the monologues along with our students and can testify at the startling insights and compassion that can arise. Usually, we—students and teachers—tap into our own well of pain, pride, sorrow, confusion, and joy. Although we may never have experienced war, we know the pain of losing a family member or friend; we have experienced the difficulty of making a tough decision. Likewise, we have felt joy. From these shared emotions we can construct a piece that allows us to attempt a momentary entrance into another person's life.

In our Literature and U.S. History class, we read "A Jury of Her Peers" by Susan Glaspell, a 1917 story about rural women's lives. In the story, Minnie Wright, who lives on an isolated farm, strangles her husband in desperate retaliation for his strangling her bird, the creature that brought her the only piece of joy in an otherwise bleak life. We suggested students might begin their monologue or poem with "Write that I …" Maryanne assumes the persona of Minnie Wright and tries to imagine what in her life would lead her to commit such a crime:

> Write that I was young,
> tender like the gardenia blossom …
> I know that you think
> I killed my husband,
> my keeper, protector.
> I stayed in that house, broken
> chairs beneath me, husband on top
> pushing his fury through me …
> Please don't forget the bird.
> You must tell them about its voice.
> It was strangled.
> We were strangled.

Interior monologues tap other people's pain, but they also tap people's hope. After watching *The Killing Floor*, about World War I black migration to Chicago and union organizing in the stockyards, Debbie wrote an interior monologue from the point of view of Frank, a black worker recently arrived from the South:

> *I sit and listen to the unfamiliar air of music drifting in through my window. Crickets had made music in the South, but never in a tune like this one. I want Mattie to hear this new music. The sound of white men's feet on the dirt avoiding our black bodies on the sidewalk. Oh, to share the sounds of coins clinking together as I walk.*

As students read their pieces aloud in the circle, we ask them to take notes on the "collective text" they create, to write about the common themes that emerge, or questions they're left with. Or we might pose a particular question for them to think about. For example, we watched the film *Glory*, about a regiment of African American soldiers who fought in the Civil War. Afterwards, we wrote a dictionary definition of the word "glory" on the board and asked students as they listened to each other's interior monologues to notice: "Where is the 'glory' in the film *Glory*?" Students' own writings and observations became different points of entry to explore the contradictions in the film and the events it depicts. For example, Eugene wrote: "In our class reading it was commented that there was mostly pain and not much glory. I think that their pain was their glory, the fact that they were willing to be martyrs. They were fighting for a freedom that they knew they would never have, because most of them would die in the war."

Empathy and sympathy are different. When Ghantel writes her *Color Purple* interior monologue from the point of view of Mr._____, Celie's uncaring husband, she shows empathy; she tries to imagine how he looks at the world and wonders what experiences made him who he is. But she's not sympathetic; she doesn't approve of his behavior. In fact, she detests him. Interior monologues, by encouraging students to empathize with other people, no matter how despicable, invite kids to probe for the social causes of human behavior. People are not inherently sexist or racist; and while interior monologues are not analytical panaceas, they can be useful tools in nurturing insight about why people think and act as they do.

In our experience, success with interior monologues depends on:

- Drawing on media or writing that is emotionally powerful.
- Brainstorming character and situation choices so most students can find an entry into the assignment.
- Allowing students the freedom to find their own passion—they might want to complete the assignment as a poem, a dialogue poem, from the point of view of an animal or an object (Minnie Wright's dead bird, for instance).
- Giving students the opportunity to read their pieces to the entire class.
- Using the collective text of students' writing to launch a discussion of the bigger picture.

Writing interior monologues won't necessarily have students hugging each other as they sing "We Shall Overcome," but they are a worthwhile piece in our attempt to construct a critical, multicultural curriculum. We want students to think deeply about other people—why they do what they do, why they think what they think. We want them to care about each other and the world. Interior monologues are a good place to start. ■

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