Dialogic Inquiry:
Toward a Sociocultural Practice and Theory of Education

在对话中学习：
社会文化理论下的课堂实践

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导读

⊙ 周燕

作者及其相关研究

　　本书作者戈登·韦尔斯是一位在教育研究领域颇具声望的学者。他起步于英国布里斯托大学对儿童在家庭和学校内语言发展的跟踪研究，这方面的研究成果使得他确信儿童需要丰富、多样的对话交流来学习并领会意义、构建经验。1984年，韦尔斯转到加拿大多伦多大学安大略教育研究所工作，其间开展了一系列研究者和教师之间的合作研究，探讨教师在课堂活动中使用不同的话语模式对教与学的影响等重要问题。从2000年7月起，他成为美国加利福尼亚大学圣克鲁斯分校教育系教授，继续他在教育活动中通过"对话"进行学习的研究。

　　本书的出版源于韦尔斯于1991年所获得的美国Spencer基金会的一项资助，这使他得以开始探索一种新的课堂研究方式。他发现传统的教育研究把教师排除在研究之外，研究者从自己的视角观察教师的课堂活动，把研究成果以报告的形式告知教师们，这并不能真正推动教师在教学实践中的成长。他在这个研究中吸引教师和学生共同参与，使研究者和研究对象在整个过程中通过交流和对话同时获得对教学的全新理解和改进，共同分享课堂话语和文字形式在探究中的作用。在维果斯基、韩礼德和杜威等人的理论指导下，韦尔斯集自己多年的教学经验和在这项教师–研究者合作研究中所积累的素材，形成了自己的学习理论。本书是这个研究的一个重要成果，其中第二部分的案例都来自他和师生共同探讨过程中的收获，韦尔斯从中发现了"在对话中学习"的巨大潜力及其在课堂教学中的可操作性。

本书概要

　　本书共分三大部分。首先韦尔斯向读者阐明他"在对话中学习"的理论基础是

俄国心理学家维果斯基和美国语言学家韩礼德所主张的"以语言为核心的学习理论"。在解读这个理论基础时,韦尔斯通过对知识及其来源的辨析确立了语言的形成和发展在知识发展中的关键作用,继而论述在课堂学习中话语和文字对课堂活动参与者在交往过程中建构知识的促进作用。

在第二部分,韦尔斯运用在课堂研究中所发现的案例为他的学习理论提供了有意义的实证支持。他所选择的问题都是在当代课堂中具有普遍意义的重大问题:比如学校在现代社会到底起什么作用,课堂话语基本模式——提问-反应-回馈 (IRF) ——的再评价,理解教学中渐进性话语,教学"活动"话语中的工具作用,写作在解读意义时的中介作用等。这些案例从实践的层面上解读了韦尔斯的学习理论。在他看来,课堂话语(不仅是教师用语,还包括教师与学生在探讨学习内容过程中的对话以及教师和学生分别就学习内容所进行的交流)促进学生的认知发展,提升学生对社会文化内涵的理解及接受能力,在教与学的过程中促进教师与学生之间情感的沟通,以及学生与学生之间的社会交往能力。

韦尔斯通过这些案例提出两个值得我们注意的概念。首先他认为话语与文字表述 (talk and writing) 之间,文字表述能够帮助学生把对学习内容的浮浅认识,在与人分享的过程中升华为对概念的深层理解,完成从人际心理的互动对话 (inter-mental) 到内在心理的自我对话 (intra-mental) 这一过渡以及从社会话语 (social speech) 到内在话语 (inner speech) 的转变。这里韦尔斯及其先导对于文字语言在学生学习过程中的重视为我们提供了一个非常重要的启示,即学校教育的一个重要任务就是提升学生对于语言文字符号及其所代表的意义的吸收、分辨、理解和接受能力,因为它标志着一个人受教育的程度,思维和鉴赏的能力,同时语言文字的繁荣和发展也是任何一个社会传承文化的重要条件。联想到当前影视文化对学习方式的巨大冲击力,学校的教育者更需要坚持培养学生运用文本语言获取知识的兴趣和能力,并注意培养学生对于文字符号的文化标识指向的感知力。韦尔斯在这一部分所提出的另外一个重要的观点就是学校在人类社会发展中的作用。他指出学生在课堂与教师和其他学生的交流,不论是口头还是文字形式,都不只是在学习某种知识、某种表达方式,而是在学习能够使其顺利进入社会交往所需要的、仅为该文化所特有的语言符号、交往习俗以及行为规范。因此在韦尔斯看来,学校不仅是教会学生读书写字和知识传递的场所,还是使学生通过课堂交流学习与人交往、走向社会化的场所,是在对话中实现语言、交际、情感和智力全面发展的平台,韦尔斯在论述学校的教育功能和语言的文化培育功能时拓展了人们对学校教育的理解。

在本书的第三大部分，韦尔斯重点介绍了维果斯基的"可发展区域"（Zone of Proximal Development）理论，用案例的形式介绍教师如何根据这一理论在课堂中把握教学内容、活动设计以及提供相应的帮助来促进学习者的发展。他同时提出这一学习理论对教师所提出的严峻挑战。教师需要在教学过程中及时分辨学生的认知水平和接受能力，随时调整自己的教学安排，根据学生的需要提供适当的"脚手架"（scaffolding），促成学习的发生。这与以教案为中心，以教材和PPT为主线的传统教学方式形成了鲜明的对照。

"在对话中学习"理论及其理论基础

韦尔斯在构建他的学习理论时深受维果斯基学习与发展理论以及韩礼德的功能语言学理论的影响。尽管他认为维果斯基和韩礼德的理论在关注点上有所不同，前者注意语言对于高级思维能力的作用，后者强调语言的社会使用，但两人在学习理论的形成中起到了共通和互补的作用。他提出维果斯基的建构主义学习理论为长期以来"以教师为中心"还是"以学生为中心"的教学理念之争提供了一个新的选择。维果斯基强调教师的引领作用和学生的积极参与、互相学习，从而在师生合作学习的过程中完成对知识的理解和认识上的飞跃。同时这种学习理论强调语言符号作为学习中介的重要功能，学习者在语言符号的作用下调整对于所学内容和内涵的理解和认识，并学会运用这些新的知识解决实际生活中的问题。韩礼德所提出的语言能力通过人的交流和对话而发展的基本理论，使韦尔斯确信学生可以通过在校学习中的对话与交流，不断提高他们对新知识的理解力和感悟力，和与人的交往能力。他提醒人们注意语言在整个学习过程中所起到的关键性中介作用。

韦尔斯承认他的学习理论是在两位先导的理论基础上对于学习行为的一种新的诠释，同时他强调他多年所从事的教学科研和课堂实践是形成该理论的实证基础。韦尔斯是如何建构他的学习理论的呢？首先他强调教育只有在与孩子们共同探讨与他们生活密切相关并能够引起他们极大兴趣的问题中实现，而空洞抽象的教育对学生没有意义。因此教师首先要保护和调动学生对未知世界的兴趣和好奇，通过课堂对话与学生共同探讨他们感兴趣的问题，奠定有效学习的基础。然后他通过对知识的不同定义和人类在获取知识过程中所从事的各种活动的解读来搭建人们对学习行为的理解。韦尔斯首先从什么是知识谈起，提出知识的起源是人们试图对生产活动和生活的再呈现，其方法由原始的口语描述逐渐发展成初级

的文字记载, 语言则因此而产生和发展。语言是知识的载体, 它在推进知识深化的同时不断得到发展, 两者互为因果, 互相推动。维果斯基认为获取知识是人的自然能力, 他们因为生产和生活的需要而发展语言, 构建知识。随着人类获取知识的渠道不断拓宽, 伴随着从话语呈现向文字表述而发展的知识, 也出现了不同的层次。首先是人们最常见的、适合所有人的基本学习需要的以工具性 (instrumental)、程序性 (procedural) 和实体性 (substantive) 为主要特征的知识, 人们通常可以在基本的生产活动和生活中体验、发现和理解这样的知识。然而当这些知识需要得到更多人的认同、被更多人理解时, 它们由"专家"们用文字的形式总结、概括和呈现出来, 经过了文字加工后的知识进入了它的高级形式, 呈现出知识的审美性和理论性特征, 也可以说文字的出现增加了人们对知识的加工能力、概括能力和理解能力, 也使知识从初级的工具性、程序性和实体性上升为它们的高级形态即知识的审美性和理论性。虽然很多知识可以通过人们的经验和交流获取, 但是知识的高级形态是需要由学校教育和专家的启发和指导才能够获取的, 这也是为什么学校教育在学生的思维发展中起到至关重要的作用, 因为学校所能提供的是前人经过了大量的实践经验和理论总结所获得的高层次的知识, 是需要经过系统的学习才能够被人们认识、理解和接受的知识。韦尔斯为此总结出人们在获取知识时所要经历的四个基本阶段: 1) 在个人亲身经历基础上的对知识的认识; 2) 与他人的信息交流和理解; 3) 与他人共建对知识的理解和认识; 4) 达到对知识更深层次的理解。不论人们在上述过程中的哪个阶段, 都无法离开语言这一基本中介来取得对知识的初级认识或更深层次上的理论认识。我们也可以从这四个环节中看到人们在获取知识的努力中可能经历的由内及外再由外入内的过程。在通过个人经历获得初始的感受之后, 知识在与他人的沟通和交流中形成, 并在更大和更广的层面上的交流和分享中得到升华和发展, 但是最终一个人能够从知识的交流和发展中学到什么, 取决于每一个参与知识建构的人在自身经历、知识基础和接受能力等因素的作用下对知识的理解。

　　韦尔斯在完成了对知识的定义和分类以及语言在获取知识过程中的作用的讨论之后, 重申了语言在人类发展和个人思维发展中所起到的决定性作用, 并提出本书的基本概念: 课堂中的对话和交流至关重要, 它不仅可以调动学生获取知识的兴趣, 提高他们的学习能力和对知识的感悟力, 同时它向学生传授进入社会交往的模式和方法, 增加他们在与人交往中的文化感知与生存智慧。

对本书的评价

《在对话中学习：社会文化理论下的课堂实践》是一本好书，它不仅为如何准确认识和理解社会文化理论在教育活动中的应用提供了很好的注释，同时为一个新的学习理论提供了重要的实证基础。通过本书，我们可以了解作者如何从哲学层面上解读知识的概念，追溯知识的来源，分析获取知识的途径，并看到他如何在此基础上建构一个新的学习理论，并以实证研究的数据为它提供支持。作者对一些教育领域基本问题的探究将会为读者带来反思，为当前在各层教育机构中开展的教学改革提供有益的启发。本书的几个主要的亮点是作者对教育的理解、对知识的解读和定义、对获取知识的方法及其重要性的论述以及对教师教育所提出的挑战。

韦尔斯认为教育要通过与受教育者的交流和对话来完成，其主题必须与学生的生活和认知密切相关并且能够引起他们的兴趣，否则教育就没有意义。因此保护学生的好奇心和对未知事物的兴趣，鼓励孩子们产生理解世界的愿望并愿意与他人共同探究是学校教育的一个重要任务，也是实现教育目的的一个基本条件。因此在课堂学习中教师的主要任务不仅仅是传授知识，更重要的是创造良好的学习环境，设计合适的学习活动，搭建符合学生认知水平的平台，以便鼓励学生敢于和肯于通过交流来探求和获取知识。在韦尔斯看来，教师不仅要有丰富的知识，还要有敏锐的观察力和交流能力。一个教师的能力不在于他掌握了多少专业知识，而在于他能够把握学生的认知水平，并根据学生的需要搭建起可以鼓励和帮助他们获得新的知识高度的脚手架，培养学生不断向新的知识高峰攀登的能力。

了解了作者的教育观，就不难理解作者对知识的分析和解读以及如何获取知识的论述。作者在分析知识的起源、种类和定义的时候，重点谈到了知识和获取知识的区别 (knowledge and knowing)。韦尔斯强调本书探讨的不是学习什么而是如何学习的问题，因为后者对于一个人的成长至关重要。长期以来，教育的关注点一直是学什么的问题，我们的课本是太难了还是太容易了，我们有没有满足学生的认知需要，我们的教学内容是不是落后于时代的发展等等，但是对于"如何学习"，也就是学生获取知识的方式，却很少给予足够的重视。在很多人看来"教学方法"只是辅助学习的手段，而韦尔斯则认为，教学内容固然重要，但用什么方式获取知识更加重要，因为它直接影响着受教育者的认知习惯和思维发展潜力。韦尔斯在讨论知识的产生和发展时，提到人们在生产活动中运用口语和文字两种交流模式推动他们认识事物的发展。实践证明，在课堂学习活动中，通过对话和交流获取

知识是提高学生学习能力和认知发展的关键条件。话语是思维活动的推动力,大量的课堂交流与对话不仅丰富学生对知识的理解,同时促进和活跃他们的思维能力。对比我国主流课堂教育的特点,至今为止我们仍然没有摆脱"以教师为中心"的传统教学模式,而学生获取知识的方式则基本上还是处于"被传授"状态。因此虽然中国学生可能在掌握知识的深度上比很多国家的同龄人有优势,但是我们的学生在知识的广度、对未知事物的探究力、创造力和对学习的兴趣等方面却往往比不上他们的异国伙伴。这是因为我们的教育在学生思维发展最为活跃的十六年中,没有充分地利用课堂时间鼓励学生与教师的对话、学生与学生的对话,而是通过"满堂灌"的知识传递方式把学生们与生俱来的好奇心一点点泯灭,用无休止的应试把他们原有的探究力与创造力磨钝。在这种学习方式的熏陶下,我们的学生失去了他们应该享有的思维发展空间和对知识和未知世界的兴趣与渴望。这是我们教育的重大缺陷,是值得教育者深刻反思和迅速改变的一个残酷的社会现实。

改变落后教育模式的现状,不能仅靠教育技术的更新,更重要的是教育者理念的变化与更新。教师教育是韦尔斯在本书中所提出的另一个重要的问题。本书提出的学习理论,强调教师与学生在课堂上的交流与对话,要求教师不仅能够把新知识用学生能够理解的语言表述出来,还要设计活动,调动学生参与其中,并及时应对学生的问题,根据学生的情况作出及时的评价和调整。与此同时教师一方面要放下架子成为学习者中的一员,另一方面又要不露声色地在学生需要的时候给他们以启发和引导。这简直是太难了!但这的确是韦尔斯的学习理论期待教师在课堂中所应起到的作用。社会文化理论框架下的教育者不同于任何其他理论框架之下的教育者,它既不会像传统教育中那样"以教师为中心"忽略学生的差异和需要,也不会"唯学生为中心"弱化教师的作用,而是非常强调教师在课堂中的引领作用,强调教师是学生学习过程中的"关键人物"(the significant other)。一个教师需要做的事情,除了通常的备课、上课和评价外,还涉及很多语言和非语言方面的中介作用,比如教师对学生现状的评估和反应、对学生发展潜力的评估以及在此基础上的任务设计,以及在课堂交流过程中的参与和对时间的把握等等。毫无疑问,教师专业能力的提高是实现韦尔斯学习理论的前提。韦尔斯提出对教师的培训也需要改变传统的知识传授方式,而要以教师之间的交流和互动作为教师学习和发展的主要推动力。教师教育者要尊重教师们已有的知识和经验,通过与教师的分享和交流,在教师的"最近发展区域"范围内实施教育,只有这样才能真正进入教师的世界,有效地解决教师的困惑,回答他们的问题,满足他们的需要。韦尔斯的学习理论为我们教师教育工作者和研究者提供了有意义的启示。

　　长期以来，教师教育工作者所面临的一个难以解决的困惑就是理论与实践脱节的问题。韦尔斯期望通过他的尝试扭转两个在教学科研中普遍存在的问题：一、教学研究从研究者的视角出发，缺少对于课堂的历史和情境的关注，因此研究者通常以描述课堂为起点，却往往使它变成某种效仿的案例，成为限制课堂个性发展的因素；二、通过专家经验和研究者成果介入而进行的教学改革，忽略了课堂主导者——教师——的参与和他们所应该充分发挥的作用，这样的教学改革不能为教师和学生的发展提供足够的空间。韦尔斯在本书中提出任何可以真正促进人的发展的教学改革，一定是教学－科研人员共同合作的成果，即在课堂参与人和教学研究者共同解决所面临的实际问题过程中所产生的决策、行动和所带来的成果。教师在这个合作过程中受到启发、触动、反思并产生行为上的变化从而实现自身的发展，而研究者对于研究主体和主题的认识也是在这种合作中得到不断地调整和深化，进而得到视角和认识上的改变，获得自身的提高。韦尔斯因此强调本书的部分章节不仅仅是为了学术上的理论争鸣，而是基于研究者与教师们在课堂实践活动中的共同发现，把社会文化理论运用于一个多元文化环境之中的宝贵尝试。他确信这种学习模式不是高高在上的空谈，因为它已经、正在和即将在课堂中获得实施。

　　值得欣慰的是，韦尔斯所倡导的教师与研究者的合作学习共同体已经在各国得到普遍的认同，在课堂教学中通过师生共同的交流与探究来获取知识正在成为我国教学改革中的一个目标，我们期待在中国的课堂里能够看到更多鲜活的思想和灵魂的碰撞，使我们的学生早日从乏味的模拟试卷中解放出来，在与教师和同伴的交流和互动中吸取知识，品尝学习给他们带来的快乐和希望。

Dialogic Inquiry: Towards a Sociocultural Practice and Theory of Education

For more than a quarter of a century, the polemics surrounding educational reform have centered on two points of view: those who favor a "progressive" child-centered form of education, and those who would prefer a return to a more structured, teacher-directed curriculum, which emphasizes basic knowledge and skills. Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory offers an alternative solution, placing stress on dialogue and co-construction of knowledge. His theory of a collaborative community between teacher and student helps to resolve the conflict between traditional teaching and unstructured learning.

Dialogic Inquiry provides an extended analysis of the crucial Vygotskian concept of the zone of proximal development, and it documents how the author collaborated with teachers in mutually supportive ways. In addition, Dr. Wells provides a unique comparative analysis of the theories of Vygotsky and those of the linguist M. A. K. Halliday. The former's influence has been widely documented, but the latter's influence on the educational discourse literature has not been given its due. The author's analysis will bring new (and deserved) attention to Halliday's insights and their relevance to sociocultural theories of education.

Using illustrative examples from classroom studies, *Dialogic Inquiry* will be of tremendous benefit to educators, as well as to researchers in sociolinguistics and psychology.

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Conventions of Transcription

Layout	Turns are numbered consecutively. Within turns, each new utterance starts on a new line. Speakers are indicated by name or initial letter of name.
-	Incomplete utterances or restarts are shown by a hyphen on the end of the segment that was not completed. Continuations after an intervening speaker are shown preceded by a hyphen.
.	One period marks a perceptible pause. Thereafter, each period corresponds to one second of pause, e.g., "Yes ... I did"
?!	These punctuation marks are used to mark utterances that are judged to have an interrogative or exclamatory intention.
CAPS	Capitals are use for words spoken with emphasis, e.g. "I really LOVE painting"
< >	Angle brackets enclose segments about which the transcriber was uncertain.
*	Passages that were insufficiently clear to transcribe are shown with asterisks, one for each word judged to have been spoken.
———	When two participants speak at once, the overlapping segments are underlined and vertically aligned.
" "	Words that are quoted or passages that are read aloud are enclosed in inverted commas.
( )	Interpretations of what was said or descriptions of the manner in which it was said are enclosed in parentheses.
[ ]	Square brackets enclose descriptions of other relevant behavior.

Lest this should immediately alienate those who believe that education should be about equipping students with the knowledge and skills that are culturally valued, I should make it clear immediately that I am also in agreement with that goal. But *how* students are educated is as important as what they are expected to learn, and it is on the "how" that I want to focus in this book.

In arriving at my present understanding about learning and teaching, I have been strongly influenced by Vygotsky's theory of learning and development. Indeed, my original intention was to title this book "Thinking with Vygotsky," in order to emphasize how I have used his ideas to shape my own. However, that title would have failed to recognize the equally important influence of others, whose contributions I shall refer to below. Nevertheless, I believe that Vygotsky has been the most influential.

For more than a quarter of a century, educational reform efforts have been locked in a sterile argument between those who advocate a "progressive," child-centred form of education and those who argue for a return to a more structured, teacher-directed curriculum that emphasizes basic knowledge and skills. However, with its recognition that cultural continuity and individual creativity are complementary and interdependent facets of all activity, and hence of the developmental learning trajectories of those who participate in them, Vygotsky's social constructivist theory offers a way out of this impasse. In the place of traditional transmissional teaching on the one hand and unstructured discovery learning on the other, his theory places the emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge by more mature and less mature participants engaging in activity together. It also focuses on semiotic mediation as the primary means whereby the less mature are assisted to appropriate the culture's existing resources and guided as they use and transform them for the solution of the problems that they consider important. In the place of competitive individualism, his theory proposes a collaborative community in which, with the teacher as leader, all participants learn with and from each other as they engage together in dialogic inquiry.

This form of dialogic inquiry is also what distinguishes contemporary efforts to realize a vision of education based on Vygotsky's ideas. In his brief working life, he did not himself put forward a fully articulated theory of education and, even if he had, his theory would not have been entirely relevant to the very different world in which we live today. The appeal to Vygotskyian theory, therefore, is not an attempt to revive a revolutionary, but outmoded, pedagogy; rather, his theory provides the point of departure for an ongoing inquiry by educators from many countries,

Introduction

James, age 5, comes into the kitchen just as his mother has taken some cakes out of the oven. There is a loud, metallic "Crack."

> *James:* Who did that?
>
> *Mother:* I expect it was that tin contracting
>
> *James:* Which tin?
>
> *Mother:* The one with your pastry in
>
> *James:* Why did it make that noise?
>
> *Mother:* Well, when it was in the oven, it got very hot and stretched a bit . I've just taken it out of the oven, and it's cooling down very quickly, you see, and that noise happens when it gets smaller again and goes back to its ordinary shape
>
> *James:* Oh! was it a different shape in the oven?
>
> *Mother:* Not very different . just a little bigger
>
> *James:* Naughty little tin . you might get smacked - if you do it again
>
> (Wells, 1986, p. 59)

My central argument in this book is that education should be conducted as a dialogue about matters that are of interest and concern to the participants. This is how children learn about the world as they simultaneously learn to talk before they go to school; the above is just one of many spontaneously occurring examples of learning and teaching in the home that were captured on tape in my earlier study of first language development (Wells, 1985, 1986). Surely we should enable children to build on that firm foundation by encouraging their desire to understand and their willingness to observe and experiment, and to read, write, and talk with others about what interests them.

as they bring his seminal ideas on learning and development to bear in constructing solutions to the contemporary problems of public education in their different societies. As Vygotsky might have put it, his theory is not a solution, but a powerful tool for mediating further understanding and action.

A second important influence has been that of Halliday, whose functional approach to language has provided support for my conviction that the explanation of language development is to be found in the study of conversational interaction. Like Vygotsky, he also believes that intellectual development is essentially a process of making meaning with others; so, although the setting of the classroom is different in many respects from that of the home, he too argues for the central role of discourse at all levels of education. However, where Vygotsky, as a psychologist, focused on the role of language in the construction of the "higher mental functions," Halliday has been concerned with language in its social uses and with the relationships between spoken and written texts and the situations in which they are created and interpreted.

Nevertheless, despite their different orientations, I have always found their ideas to be theoretically both compatible and complementary and, in recent years, I have attempted to exploit this complementarity in order to better investigate the discourse of learning and teaching in school. This book is the first fruit of that attempt.

These have been my intellectual mentors. But equally important have been the teachers and students with whom I have worked. I first learned about the power of inquiry for energizing learning from a Grade 3 class that I visited regularly more than a decade ago and, in that same classroom, I also learned how inquiry can be equally rewarding for a teacher who systematically investigates her or his own practice in an attempt to improve it. And, as I quickly came to realize, the two forms of inquiry are mutually supportive. That was my introduction to collaborative action research, which has been the mode in which I have worked ever since (Wells, 1994). At that time, however, there were few examples to serve as models and no tradition of funding for this kind of research.

Then – as is still the case now – much of what was taken to be known about learning and teaching in school classrooms was based on observational studies, usually large scale, carried out by visiting researchers, who spent little time in individual classrooms. Such was the nature of my own research in the Bristol study of Language at Home and at School (Wells, 1985, 1986). Whatever the advantages of this approach from a traditional methodological point of view, however, such studies have two

serious limitations. First, what is observed is interpreted almost entirely from the researcher's perspective, which inevitably lacks an experiential understanding of the history and local context of the classroom communities involved. As a result, each classroom tends to be described in terms of generalized features rather than of what is specific to its individual mode of functioning. Second, whether the purpose of the research is to explain what is observed or to evaluate it against some notional ideal, the emphasis is on describing *the way things are*. Furthermore, as these studies are subsequently disseminated, their findings take on a normative status; what was found to be characteristic of the more successful classrooms becomes the ideal that should be reproduced in every case.

There is a second tradition of educational research, more oriented to bringing about change, that is based on intervention studies. Here, an attempt is made to introduce some new curriculum materials or an improved approach to pedagogy or classroom management that has been developed by "experts" outside the classroom. In this tradition, the emphasis is on making changes to what *is* in order to achieve what *ought* to be the case – according to the beliefs and values of the originator of the change. However, this is equally unsatisfactory. For although there is a strong commitment to bringing about improvement, two essential ingredients are missing: first, the grounding of change in the specific cultural and historical context of the classrooms involved and, second, the active participation of the individual teachers concerned in deciding what sort of changes to make and how best to try to make them.

From my developing sociocultural perspective, therefore, neither of these forms of research seemed to be appropriate. First, they fail to recognize that, to bring about change that leads to genuine development of understanding for all concerned, educational research needs to be a collaborative endeavor, involving classroom participants as well as university researchers in situated inquiries that start from current practice. And equally important, traditional approaches allow no place within the research design for new ways of learning and teaching to emerge as teachers, working with informed and supportive colleagues, explore what they and their students *might be able to achieve*.

I was extremely fortunate, therefore, that in 1991, the Spencer Foundation provided a generous grant to enable me to attempt a new approach to carrying out research in classrooms. Rather than do research *on* classroom interaction, the results and implications of which I would then attempt

to impress on teachers, the proposal was, instead, to do research *with* teachers and students, with the aim that all of us should simultaneously better understand and improve the activities of learning and teaching and the part played by spoken and written discourse in these activities. This is not the place to describe in detail how our project has changed and developed, nor to present the results of our inquiries. However, it is symptomatic that, part way through, the group decided to change its name; since 1995, we have been the Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project (DICEP).[1] All the examples on which I draw in the following chapters are taken from recordings made in the course of our co-investigations and my understanding of the practicalities as well as the potential of dialogic inquiry has come from the discussions I have had with the teachers and students concerned.

On this basis, I believe, it is reasonable to claim that these chapters are not simply academic theorizing. They are equally based on practical inquiries carried out in collaboration with teachers who are attempting to put the ideas of sociocultural theory to work in their classrooms in a multicultural urban metropolis. I would emphasize, therefore, that if the vision of education I present appears somewhat idealistic, it is nevertheless an ideal that can be, and is being, achieved in practice.

Plan of the Book

The book is arranged into three parts. The first establishes the theoretical framework, drawing particularly on the work of Vygotsky and Halliday and on other writers in the fields of cultural historical activity theory and linguistic interaction. The second part includes a number of classroom investigations in which the concern is to understand the forms that dialogic inquiry can take and the conditions that make this possible. In the spirit of action research, these are not reports of findings from work completed, but essays towards improved acting with understanding. The final part explores the significance of Vygotsky's construct of the "zone of proximal development" for learning and teaching through dialogic inquiry.

Part I: Establishing the Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky certainly recognized the key role of discourse in learning and teaching, as is clear, in particular, from his final work, *Thinking*