

Revising Ophelia: Rethinking Questions of Gender and Power in School

CINDY O'DONNELL-ALLEN AND PETER SMAGORINSKY

In thinking about her first and second grade students, Karen Gallas has noted that girls often choose what she calls "the safe road" as they "fade into the background" (114). In the high school English classes we have taught, we have often seen the same thing. We too have been puzzled by girls who appear direct, confident, and articulate in individual conferences, small groups, or in their writing, yet become deferential, diffident, or tentative when facing a whole class of students. If they retreat behind their silent smiles, how can we know what these girls know?

In this article we look at the discussion of Ann, Carly, Sherril, and (briefly) Maggie, a small group of girls in Cindy O'Donnell-Allen's senior English class. The girls' discussion took place as they interpreted the character of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through their collaborative production of a body biography, an artistic interpretive medium that Cindy adapted from an *English Journal* article (Underwood 44-48). Our initial interest in studying their discussion was to try to understand how artistic interpretations of literature helped these students compose meaning in ways not available through more typical school assessments such as analytic essays. We found that the girls in this group made good use of this artistic medium to construct a sophisticated interpretation of a complex play and did so independent of Cindy's teacherly guidance.

Equally sophisticated, however, was their construction of a working relationship that allowed them to take a detour from the intellectual "safe road" that girls often choose in public settings and to travel down a more daring pathway where intellectual exploration was the norm. We discovered that their literary interpretation came about only after

the girls established a way of working together that reflected qualities of girls' "ways of knowing," to borrow the phrase of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule. Upon reflection, we realized that Cindy's classroom organization seemed particularly supportive in enabling these girls to discuss and interpret Ophelia in ways well-suited to their enculturation as middle-class American girls—two white (Carly and Ann), one African American (Sherril), and one Native American (Maggie).

Given a choice of characters from *Hamlet* to portray, Ann, Carly, Sherril, and Maggie selected a woman who played it safe, that "poor thing" Ophelia, as they referred to her in their discussion. Controlled by her father Polonius, underestimated in her intellect by her brother Laertes, manipulated by the more powerful Claudius and Gertrude to meet their own purposes, caught in the crossfire between Hamlet and his parents, beautified even in her death by Gertrude, Ophelia is arguably the most isolated character in the play and the one whose welfare is most routinely abused or disregarded.

Seeking to please others even when their requests are unreasonable, Ophelia responds to her

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father's demands early in the play that she stop seeing Hamlet with "I will obey, my lord." Throughout the play such obedience proves to be her defining feature. In the end Ophelia does find her own voice, but the cost is precious: the loss of her mind and eventually her life. As Carly put it, it's no wonder that Ophelia wound up "crazy as the dickens" or that she retreated into the private world of her madness where, as Ann noted, "ignorance is bliss."

Mary Pipher has already seen Ophelia as a metaphor for the lives of the adolescent girls she has counseled. What, however, might Ophelia also share in common with the smiling good girls that fade into the second row of many of our classrooms? Because these students routinely avoid risking their voices in public settings, is their intellectual welfare being underestimated or even ignored? How might we change classroom organization and process in order to provide them better opportunities to shine?

According to many who have studied girls' experiences in school, girls' voices are typically suppressed, downplayed, or overridden by those of louder, more competitive, more certain, and usually masculine students. Girls, in contrast, tend to be

- tentative, indicated by hesitations, false starts, qualifiers, politeness, intensifiers, repetition, slow rate of speech, deferential remarks, and tag questions
- nurturing, indicated by efforts to encourage the contributions of other speakers
- connected with other speakers, indicated by the way in which discussions are cohesive and collaborative
- indirect, allowing them to establish a rapport and requiring listeners to make inferences
- powerless, as indicated by the competitive style of talk that is rewarded in classrooms and the tendency of girls to collaborate rather than engage in conflict

We wish to make two points regarding these conclusions. One is that we see these traits as potentially characteristic of boys and not necessarily characteristic of girls, even though, broadly speaking, girls are more likely to reveal them than boys. The second is that we see the final trait, powerlessness, as situational—that is, that schools disadvantage girls (or anyone who acts in connected rather than competitive ways) primarily when schools view knowledge as fixed and discussions are conducted to reward those who can argue their positions with

the greatest certainty. Classrooms that allow multiple ways of knowing, foster an ethic of care and connection, and allow for speech that is exploratory and collaborative can allow other types of power to emerge and flourish. The discussion we present in this article illustrates how this group developed authority through these alternative processes.

Classroom talk does not take place in a vacuum, and we think that Cindy's classroom values and organization set the stage for the girls' collaborative artistic interpretation to fly. Cindy arranged her class to provide an environment that allowed all students opportunities for making personal connections and thinking open-endedly about problems through classroom activities. Her class included

- a reader-responsee pedagogy
- process-oriented classes designed to promote personal reflection and growth among students
- activity-based and student-centered methods of developing literacy skills
- reliance on students' life experiences to inform their understanding of literature and to provide the basis for their writing topics
- frequent use of small groups, exploratory discussion, response logs, and nontraditional assessment

The class's reading of *Hamlet* took place at the beginning of the second semester of the students' senior year and illustrated many of Cindy's values. The reading took about three weeks and included performing scene enactments, listening to segments from an audio recording of the play, watching segments of the Zeffirelli version of the play, translating Shakespearean dialogue into familiar language, and discussing the play frequently. At the conclusion of the play, Cindy organized the class into five groups, with each group responsible for interpreting a different character through a body biography. For this activity, groups were provided a large sheet of butcher paper on which they traced the outline of one of the students. Within this outline they then drew pictures, wrote words, and included key lines from the play that they believed represented significant aspects of the character's personality, experiences, actions, and relationships. (See Appendix for details of the assignment.)

Early on in our analysis of the girls' discussion, we were struck by the way their talk was tentative, nurturing, connected, and indirect as they

worked on their body biography composition. (See Figure 1.) Yet, rather than leaving them powerless, as claimed by some observers of schooling, their discussion allowed them to develop both individual and group power within the possibilities offered by Cindy's way of teaching the class. The inclusive nature of their speech fostered a collaborative working relationship that paved the way for their joint interpretation of Ophelia in their body biography.

In this group, Carly, a skilled organizer and highly motivated student, initiated the group's work on the body biography. She was a successful student and a leader in the school's student government and thus was able and experienced in leadership roles. Carly focused on what the assignment required and then made an effort to include the other girls and make sure that each had a role. At one point she suggested a strategy for how to interpret the play. Carly then invited Ann and Sherri to help her put the strategy into action. (Maggie, the fourth girl in the group, was absent during much of the discussion.)

Carly: Okay, do you know what we should do, Ann?

Ann: What?

Carly: Brainstorm things that represent Ophelia, like the, like things she did, like—we need a piece of—here, I will get a piece of paper and a pen, and you guys can write them down. Okay, here's some paper and a pen.

Ann: Thank you. All right, brainstorm stuff that represents her?

Carly: Yeah, like stuff she did or anything about Ophelia, like in the whole thing.

Ann: She was heartbroken by Hamlet. So we could draw a broken heart.

At this early point in their discussion, their language is tentative, nurturing, connected, and indirect. The tentativeness is indicated by the ways in which plans are offered as possibilities rather than directives. Carly's efforts at inclusion nurture the other group members by inviting them to become more involved in the production. The way in which the girls acknowledge and build on one another's contributions indicates their connectedness. Carly phrases her ideas as questions rather than commands, revealing her indirect way of asking for contributions.

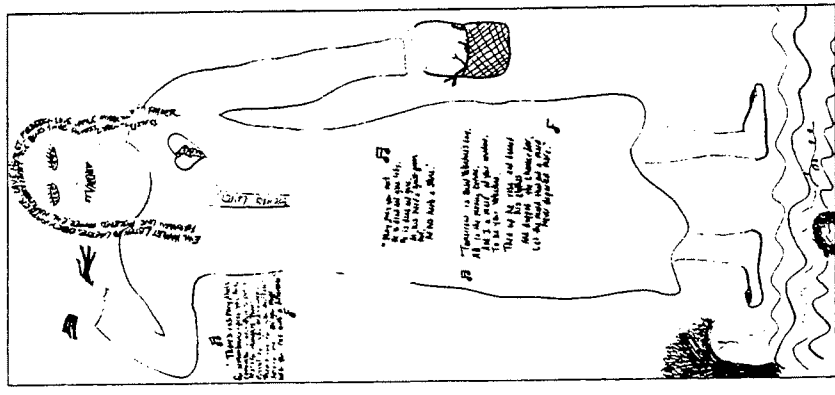
Another thing we saw happening in their discussion was that one girl would make a negative comment about herself and another would imme-

diately offer reassurance. The following exchange took place shortly after they had begun working. Ann had lain down to be traced and expressed a concern that her fingers appeared to be fat because the outline had inflated their appearance:

Ann: Oh, not bad—okay, we could go over it with like the marker and make it look a little thinner.

Sherri: Your fingers are not that fat, so don't worry.

FIGURE 1.
BODY BIOGRAPHY OF OPHELIA.



Carly: It is like, oh, finger exercises. Okay, let's—

was she wearing a dress? That might be easier, oh, she was wearing the dress, then we'll just put on a dress.

Ann: Yeah, because they went like tight here and then they just, like all the way down.

Carly: Do you want to do that?

Sherri: Yeah, weren't you saying you were just going to do bare feet?

Carly: Yeah, we'll do bare feet, okay.

Ann: You wanna trace your sketch?

Carly: Okay, is it okay if I go ahead and, like, do the dress?

Ann: Yeah.

Carly: You sure?

Ann: Yeah.

Carly: Any of you guys want to do it?

Sherri: No, it doesn't matter.

Ann: I wouldn't know where to begin.

Ann's self-deprecating remark about the size of her fingers was immediately met with positive words from Sherri and Carly's attempt to lighten the mood. They then began to discuss how to represent their character on the body biography, after first sorting out their roles. Carly took her own role only after offering it to the others. Her effort at inclusion was met with Ann's self-deprecating remark about her ability to provide a good drawing, following which they began a discussion of how to depict the character's literal appearance in the play and film.

This supportive way of working together was revealed in other ways as well. In producing their interpretation, they first focused on interpreting the character literally and then moved to a discussion of how to create symbols to show how they viewed her. By going from the literal to the figurative, they were able to begin their discussion with topics that allowed for easy agreement, only moving to more ambiguous questions of symbolism after their confidence was established. Here, for instance, is a discussion that took place early in their interpretation:

Carly: Okay, how does that, how did the dress, it came in and goes—

Ann: It goes down right below the boobs and then they just—

Carly: Is that the waist thing?

Ann: It's not even the waist, right here and then it just—

Carly: Is it like here, you think?

Ann: Up.

Carly: Up here?

Ann: Yeah.

Carly: Okay.

Ann: Your shoulders are a little higher.

Carly: We'll figure it out, we'll redecorate me.

Ann: Yeah, thank God for an eraser. Okay so

here's, let me just kind of, it came to right about here or something?

Ann: Yeah, they came all the way down.

Carly: God, I really need some knee pads and I'll be ready for this. Okay, I'll just have to—I'll redo this part and make it tighter, but it's a wavy dress. Can you tell?

Ann: It's supposed to be.

Carly: Good, I really don't know how, I'm not like a fashion designer at all. So if you guys have any input on this just let me know.

Ann: Looks good to me.

Carly: Should we give her hair?

Ann: Yeah, her hair was long, wasn't it?

Sherri: Yeah.

Carly: And it was kind of wavy?

Sherri: Yeah, that's her hair, but she always used to have it in a pony tail.

Ann: Or—wrapped up.

Carly: We'll put some like down here, and then we will make—see, we need the shoulders like about the same—I have really broad shoulders so that's why it looks—Do you think anyone has like a big chunk eraser?

Here they combined their attention to high-agreement issues with their continued efforts to maintain cohesive relationships. Their way of interacting, along with their focus on literal representation of the character as performed in the film, had watched, allowed all of them to participate without engaging in conflict.

As they moved from literal to symbolic images in their body biography, the girls discussed Ophelia as though she were a modern teenager, even though the assignment did not require personal connections due to the controversial themes

of incest, murder, betrayal, etc., that run throughout the play and Cindy's respect for students' sense of privacy and propriety. In the following excerpt the girls discussed Ophelia's relationship with her father and how they might depict it. In their consideration of this relationship, they talked about Ophelia as if she were a friend:

Carly: What else did she do? She had, oh, she talked to Hamlet. Oh, and she had followed her dad, she obeyed her dad.

Sherril: Right.

Ann: That's right, I forgot about that.

Sherril: Draw it in kind of a little circle. She wasn't scared of Hamlet, was she?

Carly: No—

Ann: But she was hurt by him.

Carly: She was really hurt by him, though.

Ann: If we had an old study guide—

Carly: Oh, my gosh, if we could just even go through the book. She did so much more that we're not even thinking of, let's see—

Sherril: What about that part where Hamlet says, "You're not who you think you are"? Remember that time—

Ann: When he tells her to go to the nunnery?

Carly: Oh yeah, was that—? She must have a real low self-esteem. We should probably put that down there.

Sherril: A low self-esteem?

Ann: Well, I mean, how could you have a high one with all those people around you telling you what to do and—

Carly: Yeah, really.

Ann: Telling you to go to the nunnery.

Carly: Do we ever hear her and like Laertes talking, like maybe we should put something like Laertes in there.

Ann: Yeah, Laertes told her not to date Hamlet.

Sherril: Oh, that's right.

Carly: What else?

This exchange shows how they thought about Ophelia in terms of their own understanding of how girls act in society. Both their comments about Ophelia's self-esteem and their teen language (e.g., the order "not to date Hamlet") suggest that they viewed Ophelia in light of their modern experiences as teenage girls.

Following their initial literal focus, the girls devoted much of their conversation to thinking of ways to draw Ophelia symbolically. Their concern with Ophelia's self-esteem began with their sense that she was powerless. At one point they began with a reference to the assignment, in particular the suggestion to use the character's spine to symbolize her most important goal. Their attention to this suggestion prompted a discussion of Ophelia's situation and how they might represent it symbolically, not just on her spine but in other parts of the drawing:

Ann: Okay, we could do a spine for her.

Sherril: Oh, that's what we just said.

Carly: But what are we going to put? Like what would her spine be?

Ann: I have no idea. Color, that's symbolic. If we're doing this after she's gone crazy, then we need to put a brown dress on her or white or—it's really not that much thought in the way she dresses and we have to make sure her hair doesn't look done. For symbols, we could put hair, objects, the twigs.

Carly: Maybe some water for the way she died.

Ann: You wanna put a wreath? Yeah, a little pond with a wreath floating in it.

Sherril: Maybe we could draw those outside, right outside of the body?

Ann: Like at her feet we could have a river.

Carly: Uh-huh.

Ann: Like going across the bottom.

Here, the group members engaged primarily in talk through which they developed ideas as a group. Their contributions built on one another, with the ultimate symbols that they decided on being the result of their responses to one another's tentatively offered ideas. This collaborative process resulted in the consideration of a number of ways to represent their understanding of the play symbolically, not only in terms of images but in terms of their color and location relative to one another.

The assignment called for the students to use both art and writing to interpret the character. Cindy's intention in requiring both was to get the students to think about the language of the play and to portray the character's personality, experiences, and relationships through art. The girls in this group, while considering the assignment and how to follow it, came up with the original idea of combining

art and writing when they decided to draw her hair in the form of phrases:

Carly: What are we going to put for her to obey her dad?

Ann: I don't know, we need some kind of symbol.

Carly: Maybe in her hair.

Ann: We could put something, and then have like "Listen to dad"—

Carly: See, we could put on her hair, instead of actually drawing hair, we could write "Dad" in like the curves, do you know what I am saying?

Ann: Yeah, I think so.

Sherril: Okay, but we can't draw it in back of her, she's like—

Ann: We could put like "Listens to dad, obeys dad, dad died," et cetera.

Carly: Yeah, Dad slash Hamlet.

Ann: We could like list all of the things that made her go crazy in her hair.

Carly: Okay, yeah! That's awesome! Good idea, okay.

Ann: Okay, but I don't think I'm going to turn that into a coffin.

Carly: Okay, that's good because that would be—I'm sorry if I put my butt in your face—I'll draw it in her hair.

Ann: And her hair has to be brown, too, that's what color her hair was.

Carly: Okay, can I, with chunks of black, like one letter being black or something. Okay, I'm going to, is it okay if I write a song in here?

Sherril: Uh-huh.

Carly: Okay, where is her first song? What does she say first? She says something really interesting first. Where's the, no, okay, maybe not. Should I just put all of her songs because they're not very long and they all say something interesting? Or should I put that—?

Their discussion continued with the personal relations established early, with both supportive comments and courtesies integrated into their talk. They came up with an original reading of the assignment, combining both written and graphic symbols in their body biography. Rather than being disadvantaged by their ways of knowing and interacting, this group appears to have achieved an unusual power in their ability to interpret the play through their original use of the artistic medium.

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Our consideration of this group has helped us rethink our own teaching and reconsider the power available through classroom interactions that build on respect, consideration, support, and collaboration. Among the implications for our teaching are the needs to

1. re-examine our beliefs about what counts as powerful classroom speech and more carefully consider the importance that relationships among students play in the process of group literary interpretation. By eavesdropping on this group's discussion, we have seen the potential that supportive, inclusive speech has for helping tentative students become more powerful.
2. recognize the possibilities available, especially to girls, in small group settings and through open-ended tasks such as dialogue journals, student-led discussions, and small-group projects like body biographies. We see great potential for providing opportunities for students to explore their ideas in intimate settings before presenting them to the larger group. We should add a word of caution that some observers have found that small group processes are often a reflection of the processes that take place in whole class settings, and so abusive or destructive relationships may be repeated or even exacerbated in small groups, as we found out when looking at the interactions in a different group from this class. We see, then, the need for small groups to be managed with care if they are to encourage participation.
3. realize that behind the quiet faces of reserved students there is often more than meets the eye. Recording and analyzing these small group discussions has allowed us a glimpse into the "backstage" talk that some believe is central to understanding these classrooms as a whole. By listening to these

conversations, we have been able to observe how students interact away from the crowd and to therefore think of more gentle ways to invite their participation in the more public classroom arenas.

4. re-examine our expectations for students who are typically quiet in whole class settings so that we feel more comfortable inviting them into whole class discussions with the understanding that they will have something to say.

5. be patient with reticent students as they attempt to develop more public voices. People often fumble and grope their way toward ideas, even if this sort of thinking aloud is discouraged in classrooms. We have found that, when teaching, it's often a good idea to show students how we think our way through our emerging responses to difficult questions. Through doing so we hope to encourage an atmosphere where it is safe and necessary to think aloud in response to questions that matter. By thinking through difficult questions along with our students, we hope to help them see that we, too, are growing through our experiences with texts and that the meaning we ultimately ascribe is the result of a long and laborious process.

6. provide opportunities to talk with students about how we talk. Following our analysis of these transcripts, for instance, Cindy began to ask her students to consider what a good conversation sounds like and to discuss how they talk differently in school than they do on their own time. Her students then established guidelines for their class discussions, which they revise periodically throughout the year. Some of the guidelines include

- raising questions, comments, and confusions that arise from student's independent responses to literature, first in small groups and subsequently in whole class discussions
- privileging what the students call "real questions" (those without predetermined answers) over "teacher questions" (e.g., those from the teacher's manual)
- validating silence as "think time" that is a normal response to "real questions" as students think through their ideas
- reserving the right to "pass" in a discussion if asked to respond before ready

- respecting the false starts and sometimes confused ideas of students (for teachers who are talking their way into a new understanding)

- listening carefully to what others are trying to say, and as a result connecting one's responses to prior remarks and questions
- recognizing the possibility of multiple "right" answers in light of diverse perspectives based on some kind of evidence (e.g., personal experiences, texts, real-world events)

We believe that Ophelia's legacy can be broken only if teachers and students reconsider what constitutes powerful classroom discourse, recognize the value of collaboration in the construction of meaning, and deliberately restructure public settings as safe spaces where all of us can find and blend voices of our own. Often in education, there is an emphasis on achieving a synthesis of ideas through cognitive conflict, often described as the *dialectic* nature of discourse. We see here an alternative view of discourse, one founded on the idea that thinking can develop through *dialogic* transactions; that is, those that are co-constructed and collaborative rather than based on clashes. We hope that our consideration of this group's discussion helps teachers see the potential for alternative ways of talking about literature, ones that broaden the possibilities for authoritative readings, public ways of talking, and possible mediums for interpretation for the full range of students who come to our classes.

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CINDY O'DONNELL-ALLEN taught high school English for eleven years. She is now a full-time instructor in the English education program at the University of Oklahoma. PETER SMAGORINSKY taught English in Chicago area high schools for fourteen years. He now teaches in the English education program at the University of Georgia.

APPENDIX

The Body Biography Assignment

For your chosen character, your group will be creating a body biography—a visual and written portrait illustrating several aspects of the character's life within the play.

You have many possibilities for filling up your giant sheet of paper. I have listed several, but please feel free to come up with your own creations. As always, the choices you make should be based on the text, for you will be verbally explaining (and thus, in a sense, defending) them at a showing of your work. Above all, your choices should be creative, analytical, and accurate.

After completing this portrait, you will participate in a showing in which you will present your masterpiece to the class. This showing should accomplish these objectives:

- review significant events, choices, and changes involving your character
- communicate to us the full essence of your character by emphasizing the traits that comprise that person
- promote discussion of your character (esp. regarding gender issues in the play)

Body Biography Requirements

Although I expect your biography to contain additional dimensions, your portrait must contain the following:

- a review of significant happenings in the play
- visual symbols
- an original text
- your character's three most important lines from the play

Body Biography Suggestions

1. **Placement:** Carefully choose the placement of your text and artwork. For example, the area where your character's heart would be might be appropriate for illustrating the important relationships within his or her life.
2. **Spine:** Actors often discuss a character's spine. This is that person's objective within the play. What is the most important goal for your character? What drives the character's thoughts and actions? How can you illustrate this spine? **Virtues & Vices:** What are your character's most admirable qualities? Worst qualities? How can you make us visualize them?
4. **Color:** Colors are often symbolic. What color(s) do you most associate with your character? Why? How can you effectively work these colors into your presentation?
5. **Symbol:** What objects can you associate with your character that illustrate that person's essence? Are there objects mentioned within the play itself that you could use? If not, choose objects that especially seem to correspond with the character.
6. **Formula Poems:** These are fast, but effective, recipes for producing a text because they are designed to reveal a lot about a character. (See the additional handouts I gave you for directions and examples.)
7. **Mirror, Mirror . . . :** Consider both how your character appears to others on the surface and what you know about the character's inner self. Do these images clash or correspond? What does this tell you about the character?
8. **Changes:** How has your character changed within the play? Trace these changes within your text and/or artwork.