"Embracing Multiple Perspectives"[1]: Dynamics of Harmony and Dissonance in English Classroom Discussions

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we examine the discourse patterns unfolding in first-year writing classroom discussions, with attention to the ways those dynamics are informed by broader sociocultural contexts. In examining students' discourse moves through sociocultural lenses, including Hofstede et al.'s (2010) conception of collectivism, we trace patterns of harmony—expressions of agreement or unity—and dissonance—moments of discord or tension—in student discussions. We situate our inquiry in the Socratic Seminar, a student-centered discussion model that invites spaces for the dialogic unfolding of multiple voices and perspectives. We employ a discourse analytic approach to investigate the ways students signal harmonic or dissonant perspectives. In complicating the notions of harmony as unproductive agreement and dissonance as a disruptive force, we elucidate the ways students co-construct knowledge by negotiating a delicate interplay between harmony and dissonance. We illustrate the ways students seek deeper meanings through tonal counterpoint and the dialogic expansion of alternative interpretive possibilities. We also examine how a culturally responsive pedagogy might inform the ways we view and attempt to "move" the discussion. Ultimately, we illuminate insights into the multivocal, multiperspectival nature of student discourse as inflected by sociocultural dimensions.

Keywords: first-year writing, classroom discussion, discourse analysis, sociocultural context

Introduction

In our first-year writing classrooms with mostly Arab students in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, we noticed something different from our American classrooms: there seemed to be a lot of agreement. There were of course times when students disagreed, but the overall tone and flow of the conversation seemed less focused on argument and more focused on harmonizing. Within our existing frameworks, this seemed less productive; after all, we were taught that everything is an argument. But we wondered how studying the discourse patterns unfolding in our class discussions might challenge our perceptions and illuminate for us less argumentative—yet still dialectical—ways of constructing knowledge.

We began to recognize moments of harmony as connected to dynamic cultural influences that shape dialogic interactions within Arabic contexts (Richardson, 2004). Yet at odds with this tendency toward harmony, scholar-practitioners encourage students to "embrace nuance, tension, complexity, and different voices" (Boyd & Sherry, 2024, p. 117), to construct knowledge by engaging with dissonant perspectives. In seeking to disentangle the tensions between harmonic and dissonant dialogue, we investigate the dynamics of students' discourse; we strive to understand the ways students express

agreement, navigate moments of conflict, and invite alternative perspectives. In other words, we investigate the ways students collectively negotiate the construction of knowledge. Ultimately, we aim to discover approaches to supporting students' dialogic engagements in ways that are culturally relevant, that "focus on improving student learning, cultivating cultural competence, and supporting sociopolitical or critical consciousness" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 3). In doing so, we seek to "create opportunities for respectfully discussing multiple ways of seeing and knowing in dialogic space" (Boyd & Sherry, 2024, p. 115) in ways that are resonant with our sociocultural context.

The following questions guide our study:

1. In what ways do patterns of harmony and dissonance emerge in class discussions?
2. How are those patterns illuminated by understanding features of the sociocultural context?
3. How can a culturally responsive pedagogy inform the ways we view the purpose of discussion and best practices for structuring classroom discussion?

Theoretical/ Conceptual Frameworks

Drawing from Bakhtinian theories of heteroglossia, or multivoicedness, we examine the dynamics of student discourse with regard to dialogic space. Bouton et al. (2024) define dialogic space as "a space of possibilities, in which novel, shared meanings and ideas can develop" (p. 183). As Bouton et al. (2024) explain, dialogic space "involves participants both voicing their own perspectives and transcending them in order to attend to and engage with those of their interlocutors" (p. 183). We trace patterns of harmony—expressions of agreement or unity—and dissonance—moments of discord or tension—in students' discussion comments. We conceptualize classroom discourse as a series of rhythmic oscillations between harmony and dissonance, as individual voices that coalesce into harmony and diverge into multiple ways of knowing, thinking, and relating. Extending Nahachewsky & Ward's (2007) study of students' online discussion comments to a synchronous, in-person discussion format, we conceptualize student discourse as contrapuntal: as "visibly polyphonic and layered" voices poised in counterpoint (p. 60).

In this study, we draw from the analytical method of discourse analysis (van Leeuwen, 2015; Fairclough, 2010). Fairclough (2010) defines discourse analysis as the "analysis of dialectical relations between discourse and other objects, elements or moments" (p. 4). As Fairclough (2003) writes, language is "dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life" (p. 2). We employ Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional framework for discourse analysis, which includes: "(a) the linguistic description of the formal properties of the text; (b) the interpretation of the relationship between the discursive processes/interaction and the text, and finally, (c) the explanation of the relationship between discourse and social and cultural reality" (Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018, p. 14). Following Fairclough (2003), we intervene in the "oscillating" (p. 2), dialectical nature of language and social practices, which we conceptualize as mutually transformative dimensions. As our analysis illustrates, the textual features of students' discussion comments reveal the discursive patterns of

harmony and dissonance, which in turn illuminate insights into the dynamics of discourse within the "social and cultural reality." We investigate an intricate interplay of text and context: the complex layering of student dialogue with/in the broader sociocultural contexts in which we teach and learn.

We employ two intersecting levels of analysis: the sonata form (exposition, development, recapitulation, coda) and the discourse move (e.g., opening, building, agreeing, countering, etc.). We explain each level of analysis in greater detail below.

1.1 Sonata Form

In imbuing discourse with a musical dimension, we began our analysis by drawing on the sonata form, with its movement from exposition to development and recapitulation. Each Socratic Seminar circle discussion we interpreted as a "movement" with an opening and closing, a narrative arc reaching toward resolution or expanding reverberations. We were especially interested in the development of "contrasting musical statements…treated dialectically…[and] brought into change and conflict" before they were "restated in a new light" in the recapitulation (Jacobson, 2025). The sonata form offered a structure for analysing the dynamics of harmony and dissonance in classroom discussions: for instance, moments of dis/agreement during the discussions can be interpreted as dialectical tensions resolved into harmony. This musical metaphor helped shed light on the dimensionality of discourse.

However, as our analysis progressed, we recognized the limitations of a traditionally European musical form to interpret conversational moves, and we began exploring Middle Eastern musical traditions, which are characterized by rhythm and prosody, inflected by shifting tonalities and cadences. The waslat, for example, is a series of compositions that begins with an instrumental piece and moves between solo pieces that emphasize improvisational skill, and "vocal pieces with instrumental accompaniment" (Taufiq, 2011) that are more choral in nature. As we illustrate below, students' discourse carries an improvisational quality: a call and response, a sound into echo, as individual voices reverberate into choral responses. We thus illuminate the ways the syncopated instances of harmony and dissonance playfully subvert and complicate the narrative progression of the sonata structure.

1.2 Discourse Moves

We draw on existing scholarship on discourse patterns in classroom discussion (Delahunty, 2018; Nennig et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2016). Delahunty (2018) investigated discourse moves in university students' asynchronous online forum discussions, examining the ways instructors could "effectively facilitate knowledge co-construction" (p. 13). Building on Mercer's (2000) framework, Delahunty (2018) conceptualizes cumulative talk—"the accumulation of ideas that occurs as interactants build

uncritically on each other's ideas" (p. 17)—as the "relatively uncritical acceptance of what partners say" (Mercer, 2000, p. 33). Delahunty's (2018) work informs our examination of the ways students co-construct knowledge and the extent to which students "uncritically accept" or challenge one another's ideas. Similarly, Yu et al. (2016) examined discourse moves in online forum discussions, focusing on students' uniqueness-seeking—the tensions between the desire for belonging and the need to be unique. Yu et al. (2016) found that the participants displayed a moderate degree of uniqueness-seeking. Yu et al's (2016) study is relevant to our emphasis on the social dimensions of discourse interactions, including the tensions that might arise between individual expression and collective harmony. From another perspective, Nennig et al. (2023) sought to "capture the intricacies of student group interactions such as the flow of conversation and nature of student utterances" (p. 1). Nennig et al.'s (2023) framework for visualizing students' discourse moves, including initiating, contributing, and questioning, illuminates discourse moves unfolding over the trajectory of a discussion. Together, these studies highlight the dynamics of student discourse: the interplay of the individual and the collective, the tensions between accepting and challenging one another's ideas.

Given the context of our study in literary interpretation in the English classroom, we draw on VanDerHeide's (2018) categorization of the literary argumentative moves that students make while writing and speaking. These moves include making a claim ("stating an arguable stance"), providing evidence ("giving support, e.g., example, quote, for arguable stance), and providing commentary ("commenting on evidence in a way that works toward showing the reasoning that links evidence to the claim"). We also draw on the sub-moves derived from the moves analysis, which include retelling, stating meaning, pointing to the text, explaining the effect of the device on the reader, explaining the effect of the device on meaning, and connecting to experience. Drawing on VanDerHeide's (2018) categorizations, we identified moves in students' discussion comments including linking examples with meanings, providing commentary, and building on others' ideas. Other moves, including agreeing, disagreeing, countering, and acknowledging limitations in others' ideas, are drawn from the scholarship on discourse moves in class discussion (Delahunty, 2018; Nennig et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2016).

1.3 Scholarship on Sociocultural Contexts

It is culture that creates the conditions in which students express or withhold their perspectives; as Chan and Lee (2021) posit, sociocultural context is what determines "acceptable ways of expressing oneself." In our examination of sociocultural contexts, we build upon Hofstede et al.'s (2010) definition of culture as a "collective phenomenon" that includes "unwritten rules of the social game" (p. 6). Hofstede et al. (2010) further argue that culture is a kind of "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group… from others" (p. 6). In an educational setting, cultural group membership is reified through interactions that position students in relationship to one another, the instructor, and the learning environment.

To illuminate the sociocultural factors in our setting, we draw upon literature that examines Western teaching practices in Arab contexts. In their study of the use of debate as a strategy in Saudi classrooms, Alghamdi et al. (2022) concluded that there were unique challenges involved in deploying a strategy within "an educational context that is conventionally teacher centered" (p. 127). Similarly, Martin's (2006) study of implementing highly interactive online learning programs in the United Arab Emirates found that a "paradigm shift" (p. 24) was needed for the Emirati students in her study to transition from a more "teacher-centric learning model" (p. 24) to a more learner-centric model.

Additional literature highlights the specific cultural features of Saudi society. Students' discourse may be driven or suppressed by deferential or oppositional rhetorical moves (Chan & Lee, 2021; Romanowski et al., 2018) and Arab students' collectivist mentality might influence the tenor of class discussion. Jiang et al. (2018) define collectivism as a focus on "community, society, or nation" (p. 145), and they draw upon multiple studies that not only showed broadly that Middle Eastern cultures were more collectivist than Western cultures, but also showed specifically that "Saudi Arabia scored much higher than the USA and the UK in Hofstede et al.'s (2010) measurement of collectivism" (p. 145). This collective mindset "influences every corner of Saudi life" (p. 145). In contrast to the more deficit approach of Martin's (2006) study, Richardson's (2004) study of Arab students' reflective practices noted that students were often moving toward "equilibrium, harmony and balance" in their reflections. While students from a collectivist society still engage in robust dissonant dialogue (as our study will illustrate), their attentiveness to community contextualizes their approach to discussion.

Educators from an American context are likely to view too much harmony and equilibrium as unproductive. Wilkie and Ayalon (2023) label harmonious discussion as "consensual co-construction" and argue that when ideas are "not challenged or criticized," it ultimately "restrict[s] the opportunity for deep thinking" (p. 2). Wilkie and Ayalon's (2023) critique of consensual co-construction reflects a tradition in Western scholarship that tends to view disagreement as more useful than agreement. The very language academics use to frame writing ("argument") connotes dissonance.

While not all harmonious discussion is productive (just as not all disagreement is productive), there may be culturally inflected ways that instructors perceive harmony and dissonance in classroom discussion. The literature suggests that American instructors might be culturally primed to view dissonance as more conducive to deep thinking, while their Arab students might have their views of discussion shaped by the collectivist mindset they bring to the classroom.

In sum, this study offers three layers of analysis: 1) the sonata form, with its musical metaphors; 2) discourse moves in students' discussion comments; and 3) the sociocultural contexts in which students' discourse moves are situated. While scholarship has examined discourse moves in class

discussions, our contribution enriches the analysis of discourse with a sociocultural element. In examining students' multivocal dialogue, we investigate how a greater understanding of discussion moves and sociocultural contexts can help us open space for multivocal expressions.

Methods

Study Context

We situate our inquiry in the Socratic Seminar, a student-centered discussion model in which students in an inner circle discuss a common text while members of an outer circle observe and comment upon the inner circle discussion. We have selected the Socratic Seminar as our site of inquiry due to its potential for inviting a layered, dynamic, multivocal dialogue that decentres the teacher and encourages students' active participation (Strong, 1994). Moreover, the structure of a Socratic Seminar, with its layers of commentary and metacommentary, supports students' meta-awareness of the multiperspectival nature of dialogue.

We engaged students in a Socratic Seminar discussion of the TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009). We selected Adichie's (2009) talk due to its emphasis on the harm caused by stereotypes and the power of appreciating multiple perspectives: ideas that might resonate with our culturally diverse, multilingual student population.

We recognize the cultural tensions arising when using a Western pedagogical technique in a Middle Eastern context. To mitigate tensions between the students' assumed teacher authority and the teachers' desired student agency, our Socratic Seminars are literally and figuratively student-centered, as the instructor sits outside both circles and the students face only each other. The questions that guide discussion are posted on the board, so the students themselves have the agency to decide when to close discussion and move on to the next question.

Data Collection

We collected data, including transcripts of class discussions and students' journal responses, from approximately 360 students from across 11 sections of first-year writing classes. Students' majors include business, engineering, medicine, and life sciences. The majority of our students identify as Muslim, come from Arab backgrounds, and live in the Middle East. However, our student population is international and multilingual, with students coming from 44 countries. Students identify primarily as coming from the Middle East (including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and Turkey), but also from North Africa (including Egypt, Sudan, and Algeria), South Asia (including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), North America, and Europe. We collected data during the spring 2023 and 2024 semesters, and our study was approved by the institution's IRB[2].

We are assistant professors at a relatively small (~4,000 students), highly ranked private university in Saudi Arabia. Following either completion of an intensive English program or an IELTS score that qualifies students for direct admission, the required first-year writing (FYW) curriculum follows a scope and sequence similar to that of FYW programs in Western universities. As American professors teaching majority Arab-background students, there are numerous ways in which differences in our "collective programming" (Hofstede et al., 2010) emerge, including the expectations and communication styles we bring to class discussions.

Sources of Data Collected

1. Students' opening journal entries written in response to a quotation from Adichie's (2009) TED Talk (conducted prior to the discussion)
2. Transcription of the Socratic Seminar discussion (transcribed by the teacher and/or outer circle participants)
3. Students' outer circle metacommentary on the inner circle's discussion
4. Students' closing journal responses (conducted after the discussion):
   - reflection on the ways students' thinking about the topic may have shifted over the course of the discussion

Data Analysis

We employed a discourse analysis framework to analyse the transcribed discussions and journal responses. We qualitatively coded each class's discussion by employing two intersecting levels of analysis: the sonata form and the discourse move. First, we identified the phases or segments of each discussion based on the sonata form (e.g., exposition, development, recapitulation, coda). Then, we coded individual student comments for discourse moves, drawing from VanDerHeide's (2018) coding framework for English language arts responses, which correlates with the italicized themes we identified (e.g., agreeing [harmony]; building on others' ideas [expansion]; disagreeing, countering, acknowledging limitations in others' ideas [dissonance, counterpoint, countermelody]; identifying examples from the text; linking examples with meanings; inviting others to contribute). We coded the discourse moves as embedded within the larger sonata structure. For instance, the discourse move opening the discussion functions as what we might read as the exposition in a sonata or the sama'i in a waslat (Taufiq, 2011). We ensured inter-coder reliability by comparing the work of two coders for the same transcript. Based on the emerging codes, we composed individual close analyses of each class discussion. We then synthesized the close analyses by identifying common themes, which aided in the development of findings.

Findings

In this section, we highlight the findings from our analysis of students' discourse, including expressions of harmony, followed by expressions of dissonance.

Harmony

Call and Response: Harmonious Movements Toward Personal Revelation

The following excerpt from a class discussion illustrates instances of harmony:

> **Joud**[3]: I noticed something I understood from my perspective. One time I met a girl in the airport and another person had asked her if she went to school riding camels.
> **Multiple people in the circle**: Me too!
> **Hala**: My brother plays video games and when people learn he's in Saudi, they're like "you have computers there?" People have an ignorant view. We all have ignorance.

This discussion excerpt, in response to the question "What do you notice about the ideas and arguments in [Adichie's (2009)] talk?" commences with personal connection as Joud mentions a girl who encountered stereotypes like those Adichie (2009) related. Joud personalizes Adichie's (2009) perspective by shifting the stereotypes from Africa to the Middle East. She describes understanding Adichie's (2009) argument "from my perspective" and she is met with a choral response: several students say, "me too!", creating a high harmonic note. Expanding the harmonization while using the same melodic theme, Hala offers another example of experiencing prejudice. This example shows a misconception of Saudi Arabia that is similar to the camel-riding comment, depicting the country as underdeveloped and lacking essentials ("when people learn he's in Saudi, they're like 'you have computers there?'"). However, Hala's development changes the discussion by extracting a general principle about humanity from these examples ("People have an ignorant view"). Her commentary is meaning making, ascribing a cause to the group's examples. And then, using the first-person plural pronoun "we," she goes further to include herself and her classmates among the ignorant ("We all have ignorance").

The exposition connects the students' own stories about stereotypes to Adichie's (2009) stories, sounding a clear note of resonance, but not mere "uncritical acceptance" (Mercer, 2000). The development then expands to a principle about humanity recognized in stereotyping behaviour. Then Hala brings the discussion back to a personal recognition of her own ignorance. This passage from the discussion illustrates an interplay of sound and echo that is characteristic of Middle Eastern musical styles, in which "melodic instruments—such as the nāy (flute), zornā (double-reed instrument), ʿūd (short-necked lute), and sanṭūr (trapezoidal zither)—play in unison with the solo line during the composed parts and echo it one or two beats behind in the improvised parts" (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2011). In this instance, the accompanying voices, the others

listening to Joud, the soloist, echo the soloist in a rhythmic incantation as the students sound voices in unison, creating a sense of harmony. Like a waslat that alternates between instrumental and solo pieces, the echoing of "Me too!" opens space for expansion of dialogue: for the recognition of a shared culpability.

In this group's response to the next discussion question, there are three movements.

> *Question: What do you notice about the language and style Adichie employs?*
> **Leen**: She employed a lot of jokes.
> **Hala**: She was smart with how she phrased it, not just one side of the story. She said "I also make the mistake myself." That way her listeners are more accepting.
> **Leen**: She uses a more narrative style. A lot of stories from her childhood.
> **Hala**: Yeah it's ironic. She's talking about stories by using stories.
> **Leen**: We have stereotypes about, like, our drivers. We see them as poor, we see them only one way.
> **Hala**: I feel like that's really true. I realized this when I met someone from India and she told me about it.

Leen and Hala are in a call-and-response sequence of exposition and development. Leen introduces a topic that Hala develops, three times in a row.

In the first movement, Leen identifies Adichie's (2009) use of jokes. Hala develops Leen's theme by pointing out another strategy that makes Adichie's (2009) audience more "accepting": admitting that she too "make[s] the mistake" of stereotyping. Hala labels this move as "smart." The second technique she points out has the same effect as humour: making listeners more receptive.

In the second movement, there is a tonal shift as Leen states that Adichie (2009) "uses a more narrative style" and then expands the melody by pointing out that Adichie (2009) tells "a lot of stories from her childhood." Hala's development recasts Leen's comment, identifying the irony of Adichie (2009) talking about stories by using stories.

In the third and final movement, Leen returns to the motif of the first question, but in a more personal key. The first discussion of stereotyping went as far as collective ("we") but not personal ("I") responsibility. Leen expands on the earlier theme by providing an example of a stereotyped group in her country: drivers, who tend to be primarily from south Asian countries. ("We have stereotypes about, like, our drivers. We see them as poor, we see them only one way.") Leen provides both exposition in the current conversation and development of the earlier conversation. Drawing on the linguistic themes Adichie (2009) uses ("see them as poor" and "see them only one way"), Leen creates a triple harmony: with Adichie (2009), with the earlier discussion, and with Hala's comment about how admitting your mistakes makes the audience more accepting. This triple

harmonizing amplifies the melodic theme and allows for the discussion to move even deeper. Striking a personal note, Hala observes "I realized this when I met someone from India and she told me about it." Here, Hala resolves the earlier atmosphere of frustration at stereotypes into balance by acknowledging her personal complicity ("I") in stereotyping others. Two processes are happening simultaneously: students are understanding Adichie's (2009) text through the lens of their experiences and they are also understanding their experiences through the lens of Adichie's (2009) text.

A harmonious sequence pushes the theme of culpability and then backs off and then revisits it from a different angle. This movement can be tracked through students' use of close or distant pronouns: from "they" to "us" to "them" to "we" to "she" to "them" to "she" to "we" to "I." It is perhaps this movement that opens space for the "I" to emerge and builds the atmosphere of safety that allows for vulnerable personal applications of Adichie's (2009) message. It is this focus on "community, society, or nation" that embodies the collectivist approach characterized by Jiang et al. (2018).

According to Taufiq (2011), "what characterizes the typical sound of Arabic music" is that "it repeatedly plays around the notes in slight variations, without the musician losing sight of the keynote." The unfolding interchange between Leen and Hala can be read as playing around a note in a series of slight variations or rhythmic reverberations oscillating between closeness and distance. Indeed, the variations of Arabic music occur in "far smaller tonal steps" (Taufiq, 2011), and the subtle shifts in dialogue illuminate the profundity of dialectical negotiations underlying seemingly slight tonal variations: from this delicate interplay of intertonalities emerges a cascade of intersubjectivities—a movement from distance toward intimacy, a shifting inward from others to ourselves, from the communal to the individual, from observation to recognition.

Reverberating Resonances: The Dialogic Expansion of Ideas Through Harmony

As the following excerpt illustrates, harmony could manifest not only as agreement or unity but as an expansion of ideas that reverberate outward:

> **Sana**: [reading the discussion question] "What do you notice about the ideas and arguments in the talk?"
> **Lamia**: I noticed that it was based on her own experiences.
> **Sana**: Yeah, it's her story, but we've each lived our version of the story.
> **Manal**: She's been exposed to different stories, leading her to be more aware and understanding of what the reality is.
> **Abiha**: It could also be about how children could be impressionable, the more children are exposed to different narratives.

This passage carries an accumulative cadence. The students' comments move outward from Adichie's (2009) personal experience toward individual manifestations of a shared experience, and

subsequently toward the dimension of perception and relationality: Adichie's (2009) "awareness," "understanding," and "exposure to different stories." Each student's comment expands the interpretive theme while recasting the ideas in a different key: for instance, Sana agrees in part with Lamia's comment ("Yeah, it's her story"), while shifting the emphasis ("but we've each lived our version of the story"). The discussion progresses from the domain of individual experience toward collective experience and awareness of a shared "reality." In further expanding the discussion, Abiha invites an alternative interpretation of the ways children could be "impressionable." By employing the phrase "It could also be about…", Abiha signals a recognition of multiple interpretive possibilities. By inviting alternative interpretations, students open interpretive possibilities through dialogic expansion. In a sequence, the interpretations invite multilayered resonances that unfurl outward. Harmony is defined as "the structure of music with respect to the composition and progression of chords" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a). In attuning to the cadences of the conversation, we might envision harmony as a succession of chords vibrating across harmonic intervals, as movement toward the interpersonal, relational dimension. Yet beyond a simple harmonic progression, as in a European music scale, this passage illustrates "a spontaneous unfolding" (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2012) of ideas more characteristic of an Arabic scale that moves in tones, semitones, and even quartertones: a continual expansion outward of tonal resonances and cultural significances.

Dissonance

In contrast with the instances of harmony above, students' discourse also reveals moments of dissonance—discord or tension.

> *Question: What do you notice about the language and style Adichie employs?*
> **Nouf**: She gives a lot of stories as examples to support her ideas.
> **Leenah**: It's her point of view.
> **Nouf**: It's not only her point of view.
> **Leenah**: It's centered on her but she includes other stories.
> **Rima**: She refused to show herself as a victim.
> **Nourah**: She tried to relate to her audience so they could see themselves in her stories.

In this excerpt, multiple speakers comment rapidly, and dissonant notes emerge and then are resolved through clever recapitulation that reconciles opposing views. Nouf's exposition identifies Adichie's (2009) narrative style, her rhetorical use of stories. Leenah develops the theme by commenting that these stories represent Adichie's (2009) "point of view."

The dissonance begins when Nouf counters Leenah's statement, claiming that these stories do not merely represent Adichie's (2009) point of view. Leenah then counters with a concession ("she includes other stories") buffered by a reiteration of her first point ("it's centered on her").

The discussion's momentum is in full swing as Rima chimes in that Adichie (2009) "refused to show herself as a victim." Perhaps making a move to dispel the tension by redirecting the conversation, Rima develops Leenah's point by discussing how Adichie (2009) portrayed herself in her stories. However, Nourah's recapitulation is what truly resolves the dissonance and restores harmony ("She tried to relate to her audience so they could see themselves in her stories"). Nourah points out that Adichie's (2009) stories were not only an expression of her point of view but opened the possibility for others to "see themselves." In doing so, she demonstrates that Leenah's note ("it's her point of view") and Nouf's note ("it's not only her point of view") are resolvable into a single melody. The dialogue unfolds in a spontaneous initiation and response fashion in which the responses echo yet diffract the initiations ("It's her point of view" … "It's not only her point of view"). The succession of sound and echo creates an improvisational quality: the syncopated instances of harmony and dissonance complicate a linear progression from exposition to development to recapitulation. And indeed, a "delight in improvisation" is one of the most important features of Arabic music (Taufiq, 2011). In the classical Arabic musical tradition, it is the musician's responsibility to vary the piece according to the occasion, the time of day, and the audience–a highly rhetorically responsive practice. Contrary to what Wilkie and Ayalon (2023) posited, students' opportunities for deep thinking were not restricted by a focus on harmony. Rather, it is from the improvisational interplay of harmony and dissonance that insight emerges, through a spontaneous syncopation of voices, an expansive synthesis of perspectives, an incessant unfolding of creation.

Reconciling the "Opposition of Tonalities" Through Dissonance

Similar to the excerpt above, the following excerpt illustrates a complex tonal interplay between melody and countermelody:

Faheem: [reading the discussion question] "What do you notice about the language and style Adichie employs?"
Kabir: [Adichie] was confident, she impressed the audience, the accent was American Nigerian, and her voice was pretty loud.
Faheem: — but she wasn't trying to be someone else —
Kabir: She wasn't fake, she was herself.
Faheem: [reading the discussion question] "What kinds of evidence, strategies, and techniques are incorporated?" [Adichie] uses active stories.
Kabir: She uses storybooks and examples.
Adam: She relates her childhood abroad.
Kabir: She was transparent with the audience. She was emphasizing the points; overall, she was —
Faheem: She wasn't speaking in a loud voice.
Kabir: The audience knew what she was saying.

In a dialectical interplay of initiation and response, voices are poised in counterpoint: Kabir's comment that Adichie's (2009) "voice was pretty loud" is undercut by Faheem's response that "she wasn't trying to be someone else." Faheem strikes a note of discord, yet this moment is quickly resolved into harmony. In his response, Kabir concedes to Faheem by means of negation ("She wasn't fake") before phrasing the comment in a positive light: Adichie (2009) was true to herself. By acknowledging Faheem's counterpoint before shifting into a positive key, Kabir recasts the dissonance into harmony, reconciling the "opposition of tonalities" (Jacobson, 2025). Following a fleeting moment of discord, tonal balance is restored.

Yet as in a musical movement, a strain of dissonance re-emerges a few lines later: when Kabir comments on the empathic nature of the speech, Faheem counters that "[Adichie] wasn't speaking in a loud voice." Echoing the tonal interplay from a few lines earlier, Kabir quickly restores equilibrium by acknowledging the shared understanding between Adichie (2009) and the audience. From the fragments of discord emerge a thread of resolution as the dialogue initiates a "movement in[to] a new state of equilibrium" that closes the sonata structure (Jacobson, 2025). The tonal complexities of this dialogue—its shifting contours of melody and countermelody—challenge our constriction of it to sonata form. Through spontaneous back-and-forth exchanges, the dialogue resists closure, probing assumptions and interrogating conceptions surrounding voice, selfhood, and relationality.

In this discussion, the theme of Adichie's (2009) voice reappears as a recurring motif in a chromatic tension between point and counterpoint. The dialogue carries an undercurrent of dissonance, exposing the racialized and gendered undertones associated with referring to Adichie, a Nigerian American woman, as "speaking in a loud voice." In each instance identified above, Faheem, a Sudanese student, problematizes the notion that Adichie's (2009) voice could be construed as "loud" or as other than her own. Yet these moments of conflict invite pathways toward deeper meanings: Kabir's acknowledgment that "[Adichie] wasn't fake, she was herself" implies a connection between voice and selfhood—an authentic self rather than a performative one. Similarly, Kabir's comment that "the audience knew what she was saying" suggests a shared sense of understanding between the speaker, Adichie, and her audience—a mutual capacity for recognition. Through intervals of "change and conflict" (Jacobson, 2025), the dialogue is brought into deeper layers of revelation as the students negotiate themes of identity and relationality.

The students' comments could be analysed as instances of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, in the way that the dialogue unfolds through contradictory viewpoints. Resonating with the focus of the analysis, the content of the discussion likewise involves vocality: the amplification of Adichie's (2009) voice through vocal emphasis and the association of volume ("a pretty loud voice") with racialized and gendered ramifications. Even as students voice their thoughts on Adichie's (2009) voice, attuning to the sonic dimensions of Adichie's language, in turn, we are attuned to the aural dynamics of students' discourse.

Discussion

This study illuminates the ways students collectively negotiate meaning through a layered unfolding of discourse. We conceptualize student discourse as polyphonic, as a weaving together of voices into a synthesis of understanding. In attuning closely to the intricacies of student discourse using a discourse analytic method (van Leeuwen, 2015; Fairclough, 2010), we understand the dynamics of dialogic interaction: students invite spaces for the interpretive possibility of new meaning, deepen their understandings of thematic resonances, and craft narratives of shared identity. In revealing the "dialectically interconnected" interplay of language and social life (Fairclough, 2003, p. 2), the discourse patterns of harmony and dissonance shed light on the dialectical nature of knowledge construction within our sociocultural context. In complicating the notion of harmony as uncritical agreement and dissonance as a disruptive force, we illuminate the ways students co-construct knowledge.

Complicating Harmony

Beyond its associations with uncritical agreement (Mercer & Littleton, 2007), we could recast harmony as productive for the co-construction of knowledge. The students' dialogue illustrates the ways harmony offers spaces for constructing shared experiences and negotiating collective identity and belonging. By harmonizing with one another and with Adichie's (2009) talk, students articulate their own perspectives as refracted through the lens of Adichie's (2009) narrative. In challenging the notion that harmony is merely "polite parallel sharing" (Boyd & Sherry, 2024, p. 117) the students' dialogue illuminates the ways harmony could open spaces for vulnerability in ways that encourage them to express personal connections to the text. Harmony carries deep resonances that reverberate across sociocultural dimensions: through engaging in harmonic discourse, students co-construct knowledge while crafting narratives of selfhood.

The students' ideas resonate in harmony with one another, yet we could conceptualize this harmony as not merely "equilibrium, harmony, and balance" (Richardson, 2004), but also as dialogic expansion, a recognition of multiple possible interpretations. Phrases from students' discussion comments such as "It could also be about" open up dialogic spaces for alternative perspectives, inviting "a language of possibility" (Boyd & Sherry, 2024, p. 118) for the expansion of ideas. Echoing Bakhtinian heteroglossia, students' interpretations of the multiple possible significances of Adichie's (2009) talk could be conceived as multiple layers of meaning resounding in harmony. We thus illuminate the potential for harmony to invite generative meaning in a perpetual unfolding of ideas.

Complicating Dissonance

In moments of dissonance, students offer divergent viewpoints. As in the movement of a wave or a musical line, students' dialogue alternates between harmony and dissonance and is eventually

reconciled into harmony. In complicating the notion that interlocutors challenge one another's ideas in order to "score points and win rather than engage with the substance of conflicting ideas" (Bouton et al, 2024, p. 183), we illustrate the ways dissonance produces rich meaning in a synchrony of discordant sounds. By navigating instances of "contrapuntal tension" (Nahachewsky & Ward, 2007), students collectively negotiate conflicting perspectives while striving toward deeper understandings of identity and relationality.

By expanding conceptions of harmony beyond "consensual co-construction" (Wilkie & Ayalon, 2023, p. 2) and "uncritical acceptance" (Mercer, 2000, p. 33), we view harmony as more nuanced and potentially generative. As our analysis illustrates, harmony opens spaces for nurturing personal explorations, attuning to shared resonances, and inviting a dialogic expansion of ideas. Yet we recognize the value of dissonance in challenging assumptions and creating more critically aware conceptions. In stimulating the dialogic construction of knowledge, we encourage students to recognize multiple interpretations and to seek new ways of knowing.

Through the contrapuntal interplay of harmony and dissonance emerges resonance: "the intensification and enriching of a musical tone by supplementary vibration," "a quality of richness or variety," or "a quality of evoking response" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). Students' comments strike a chord with one another as many voices coalesce in moments of synchrony. Resonance enriches the tonality of discourse as it unfolds over intervals of initiation and response, sound and echo. In a movement from vibration to reverberation, voices reverberate in empathy with others.

Complicating the Sonata Form

Significantly, the students' dialogue complicates the existing musical classifications based on the sonata structure. In its improvisational quality, the dynamics of movement in the discussion unsettle the linear narrative progression from exposition into recapitulation that characterizes the sonata form: in the unfolding dialogue, the dialectical interplay of sound, echo, and reverberation invites richer repercussions of resonance characteristic of Middle Eastern musical traditions. In a fluid interweaving of voices, the expansive choral harmonies intermingle with undercurrents of dissonance. The symphonic progression of the sonata form eludes the dynamic complexity of the students' dialogue, in its oscillating syncopations between harmony and dissonance. In spontaneous back-and-forth exchanges, students expose, critique, and complicate ideas in a dialectical fashion, disrupting a sense of linearity, exposing gaps, resisting closure. Imbued with rhythmic cadences and tonal juxtaposition, students' dialogue inhabits a continual state of flux, oscillating between point and counterpoint, melody and countermelody, poised in contrapuntal tension (Nawachewsky & Ward, 2007) with one another's ideas. The improvisational quality of the exchanges—the moments of spontaneous expression, the subtle shifts in tone or cadence—gives rise to a depth of insight and revelation that may elude the traditional sonata form, inviting the unfurling of ideas from personal unto societal realms. The shifting tonal complexities thus stimulate deeper dialogical interactions,

opening spaces for interrogating one's own conceptions while negotiating alternative perspectives. In exposing the "oscillating" intertwining of texts and social practices (Fairclough, 2003, p. 2), the shapes of discourse illustrate the dynamic contours of dialectical negotiations in their unfolding into deeper dimensions of knowing.

Students' Reflections

In opening spaces of dialogic possibility, we echo the way Adichie (2009) calls for the audience to recognize the multifaceted nature of stories. The structure of a Socratic Seminar invites spaces for the dialogic interplay of multiple perspectives. Students' closing reflections express an understanding of the importance of embracing multiple perspectives:

Mila's Reflection: My classmates assisted me to comprehend the importance of acknowledging various perspectives and narratives. Their perspectives showed that a single story can shape one's perception and interaction with people and culture, stressing the need for a more holistic approach to comprehending people and cultures. This reminded me of how vital dialogue is and how we should embrace multiples of perspectives.

Arwa's Reflection: From this discussion I gained the skill to look at a topic from multiple directions like how my colleagues did. I only thought of how the speaker used a personal experience to convey her message but my colleague saw that in another way also, i.e. how [Adichie, 2009] focuses on literature as that is something that makes us all unite and eases our understanding.

Soha's Reflection: By discussing our various ideas, I can see myself looking at Adichie's (2009) words through a different perspective that I might have skimmed over otherwise. As Adichie says, there's always more than one side to a story and that applies to people's interpretations as well.

Importantly, students signal a recognition of multiple interpretive possibilities, articulating the benefits of engaging in dialogue with those who hold different perspectives. In her closing reflection, Soha expresses an epistemic openness, recognizing the way multiple perspectives are present not only in the ideas in Adichie's (2009) talk, but also in the interpretive process.

Discussion Reflections and Insights

It was quietly moving to witness Adichie's (2009) ideas on the multidimensionality of stories refracted through the lenses of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Students' comments illustrated the interplay of the text with the reader/viewer. Interspersed within the dialogue are vocalized murmurs of assent or dissent, communion or contradiction. Such interstitial instances spark moments of recognition, inspiring a mutual sense of belonging and awakening self-awareness. Students' dialogue illuminates insights into the power of multiple stories, yet the students' insights are refracted through a different angle as they shifted the frame of reference from

the West to the Middle East, exposing misconceptions about the Middle East while creating spaces for a heightened intercultural awareness. In interpreting their experiences through the lens of the text, students invite new ways of seeing themselves in relation to others. Dialogue thus emerges as a space through which to craft the self in the world.

Our students tread the interstices of cultures, informed by a keen consciousness of global perspectives. Many of our students have lived and attended school internationally in North America, Europe, and Asia as well as in the Middle East, "birthing hybrid or 'third' cultures that are globe-spanning, diverse, highly empathic and oftentimes difficult to translate outside these environments" (Brara, 2020). Students thus bring perspectives that are simultaneously culturally diverse yet enriched with a deep sense of shared Arabic identity, a mix that inspires a dynamic interplay between harmony and dissonance, at once inviting an echoing of choral communion and a seeking of divergent insights. Such incessant oscillations between equilibrium and discord spark a continual negotiation of knowledge as it unfolds at the interface of stasis and dynamism. In illuminating the shifting complexities of student discourse, our findings thus seek to complicate Hofstede et al.'s (2010) conception of collectivism as a reified phenomenon: through the interweaving of shifting tonalities—an interplay of the individual and the communal, self and world—students (re)shape the contours of culture, identity, subjectivity, and relationality, extending the boundaries of discursive imaginaries. In this sense, students are not only reified or shaped by collectivist cultures but actively construct and shape the telling of their stories. Even as our students navigate a multiplicity of perspectives, the broader undercurrents of our sociocultural context likewise invite tensions between stasis and change: we envision Saudi Arabia, on the eve of Vision 2030, as inhabiting a kairotic moment; fluid, dynamic, and shifting, at the cusp of transformation, at the interstices of tradition and innovation. Our students and context thus act as a catalyst for new writing studies pedagogies, inviting novel forms of criticality inflected and enriched by intercultural dynamics.

As we noted at the beginning of this article, our motivation for implementing a Socratic Seminar discussion stemmed from our observations that during our in-class discussions, students' ideas tended to harmonize with each other. We thus aimed to encourage spaces for divergent, even contradictory perspectives while also challenging our ideas of what constitutes productive discussion. One challenge of presenting this Socratic Seminar activity was that some students were less accustomed to student-centered discussions, having experienced more teacher-centered models (Alghamdi et al., 2022); only a few had participated in a Socratic Seminar prior to our class activity. Students were initially hesitant to speak, and in the quieter classes, we encouraged students to each take turns sharing their initial thoughts as a way of breaking the ice and nurturing students' confidence. In observing the dynamics of the discussions, we found that students served as natural discussion leaders who opened each circle by posing the questions presented on the slides and inviting their peers to contribute ideas. Yet from the midst of the challenges emerged a richer, more rewarding experience: we were inspired by the ways students gleaned new insights into the importance of multiple perspectives and came to a deeper understanding of their own identities and

experiences, ideas that they might not otherwise have explored. Students' reflections illustrate their expanded appreciation for the multiplicity of stories and of discourse itself.

In offering pedagogical implications, we seek to invite spaces for multivocal dialogue. By incorporating student-centered discussions such as Socratic Seminars, teachers could foster the collaborative construction of knowledge. Teachers could scaffold the discussion in ways that support students to build on others' ideas, pose questions, make personal applications, and introduce alternative perspectives. For instance, teachers could provide harmonious sentence starters (e.g., "Building on this idea," "This also made me think of... ") and dissonant sentence starters ("This moment could be interpreted differently," "From an alternative perspective... "). By connecting language choices with meaningful responses, instructors could render visible for students the ways discourse moves are realized in specific language choices. Offering an "explicit attention to language itself" (Schleppegrell, 2013, p. 156) could be especially valuable for supporting multilingual learners. In stimulating processes of reflection, teachers could help students examine the text through the lens of their experiences and examine their experiences through the lens of the text. In journal responses, students could not only reflect on how their thinking has changed but on how their ways of thinking may have changed following the discussion. Such reflections can enhance students' metacognitive awareness of their learning, inspiring "thinking about thinking" (Flavell, 1976).

In this study, we have sought to illuminate the dynamic, multivocal, relational nature of knowledge construction. We conceptualize students' discourse as dialogic relations of intersubjectivity, "the interchange of thoughts and feelings, both conscious and unconscious, between two persons or 'subjects,' as facilitated by empathy" (Cooper-White, 2014). In negotiating mutually interrelated subjectivities, students' dialogue reveals a movement between inward and outward relations, between observation and personalization. In the shift from "we" to "I," "we approach the other as a subject... valu[ing] one another's ideas, thoughts and feelings as worthy of consideration in and of themselves" (Bouton et al., 2024, p. 184); we come to see the self in the other, the other in oneself, a mutually transformative recognition. For the students, as for the teachers, it is through harmonic and dissonant discussion that we arrive at deeper understandings of ourselves, the texts we study, and the sociocultural contexts we inhabit.

Notes

1. A quoted excerpt from a student's closing journal reflection
2. IRB number: 20220
3. All student names are pseudonyms. We have secured permission from individual students to publish their discussion comments and written reflections.

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