

Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking classroom talk

Robin Alexander

www.robinalexander.org.uk

Research Findings from 500 Classes in 5 Countries including USA, England, France, India and Russia:

- Open questions made up 10% of the questioning exchanges
- 15% of the sample did not ask any open questions
- Probing by the teacher to encourage sustained and extended dialogue occurred in 11% of classes
- Uptake questions occurred in only 4%
- 43% of teachers did not use any such moves
- Pupils' exchanges were very short—5 seconds on average
- Pupil answers were limited to 3 words or less 70% of time

Seven Arguments for Talk:

- Communicative*: talk is humankind's principle means of communication
- Social*: talk builds relationships, confidence and sense of self
- Culture*: talk creates and sustains individual and collective identities
- Neuroscientific*: language and especially spoken language builds connections in the brain, during the early and pre-adolescent years preeminently so.
- Psychological*: language and the development of thought are inseparable. Learning is a social process, and high-quality talk helps to scaffold the pupil's understanding from what is currently known to what has yet to be known.
- Pedagogical*: research shows that cognitively enriching talk engages pupils' attention and motivation, increases time on task and produces measurable learning gains.
- Political*: democracies need citizens who can argue, reason, challenge, question, present cases and evaluate them. Democracies decline when citizens listen rather talk, and when they comply rather than debate.

Learning from Other Countries:

- Oracy is regarded as no less important than literacy
- Relationship between talking, reading and writing is clearly articulated—talk intrinsic to literacy
- Sustained oral work in most lessons
- Some formal assessments are oral
- Purpose of classroom talk is mainly cognitive rather than about developing confidence—focuses on developing thinking
- Teachers model talk at its best.
- Instruction between teacher and individual student is often sustained over a sequence of several question-answer exchanges
- Questions are designed to encourage reasoning and speculation, not just elicit right answers
- Teacher feedback provides information and diagnosis on which the child can build, rather than judgment alone
- Teaching has pace, but without the clock watching pressure—cognitive pace verses organizational pace

- Talk tends to display greater attention to discrimination and precision in vocabulary, grammar and syntax, to volume, clarity and expressiveness, and to the development of the distinctive registers required for different subjects (the oral equivalent of writing genres)
- The culture of classroom talk is more public and confident. Children talk loudly and clearly. They listen and expect to be listened to. And the making of mistakes in front of other children is intrinsic to learning rather than shameful or embarrassing.

Basic Repertoire of kinds of teaching talk:

- *Rote* (teacher-class): the drilling of facts, ideas and routines through constant repetition;
- *Recitation* (teacher-class or teacher-group): the accumulation of knowledge and understanding through questions designed to test or stimulate recall of what has been previously encountered, or to cue pupils to work out the answer from clues provided in the question;
- *Instruction/exposition* (teacher-class, teacher-group or teacher-individual): telling the pupil what to do, and/or imparting information, and/or explaining facts, principles or procedures
- *Discussion*: (teacher-class, teacher-group or pupil-pupil): the exchange of ideas with a view to sharing information or solving problems
- *Dialogue*: (teacher-class, teacher-group, teacher-individual, or pupil-pupil): achieving *common understanding* through structured, cumulative questioning and discussion which guide and prompt, reduce choices, minimize risk and error, and expedite 'handover' of concepts and principles

On the basis of the national and international evidence to which we have referred, recitation is and remains the default mode of classroom interaction. In contrast, discussion and dialogue are the rarest yet also the most cognitively potent elements in the basic repertoire of classroom talk.

Essential features of the dialogic classroom:

- *Collective*: teachers and children address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class, rather than in isolation
- *Reciprocal*: teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints
- *Supportive*: children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over 'wrong' answers; and they help each other to reach common understandings;
- *Cumulative*: teachers and children build on their own and each other's ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and inquiry;
- *Purposeful*: teachers plan and facilitate dialogic teaching with particular educational goals in view