

FROM CONVERSATION TO DIALOGUE

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Talk is essential to learning, and in primary classrooms a great deal of talking goes on. But what does it do for children? Our recent study of primary education in England, France, India, Russia and the United States illustrates many ways that this precious learning resource can be fostered and used.

Yet the comparisons also suggest a typically English ambivalence. In France, reading and writing are deemed no less important than here. However, real pride of place (and pride it is) goes to using the spoken word to communicate with confidence and precision, and to keeping the French language at the heart of national culture and identity. There, as indeed in many continental countries, oracy is *part* of literacy, while in England 'speaking and listening' look like an afterthought.

The ambivalence carries over into practice. The emphasis on values like community and sharing in English (and American) primary schools may lead us to view talk as social rather than cognitive, as 'helpful' to learning rather than as fundamental to it, as something we encourage ('David should try to participate more...') rather than systematically teach. Yet the warning 'I don't mind if you collaborate, as long as I can't hear you', which we heard in more than one English classroom, suggests less than total conviction even on that score.

Partly, too, it's a matter of time, organisation and the balance of reading, writing and talk across the curriculum. In our Russian schools, teachers expected children to look, listen, answer questions, read aloud, come to the blackboard, write on it, and articulate their thinking - mistakes and all - often at length. Such structured and public talk consumed a much higher proportion of lesson time than in England, and children never spent half an hour or more at a stretch writing, or indeed on any other single activity, as they often do in England. In our English classrooms, which included 'interactive' lessons conducted in accordance with the national literacy and numeracy strategies, children were more likely to read silently or to the teacher, to talk with each other rather than to the class as a whole, and to talk randomly, spasmodically and briefly rather than deliberately and at length. Here, talk even between teacher and child was as likely to be a semi-private affair, a by-product of that device which for some teachers consumes more time than any other - monitoring.

But this is not a re-run of the debate about interactive whole class teaching, for the international evidence shows that the magic ingredient is not whole class teaching as such, but the quality of interaction in this and in every setting, whether whole class, group or individual. So we need not to monitor children less and whole-class teach them more, but to use monitoring to engage and instruct rather than merely to supervise. In the best of our French classrooms a challenging style of questioning characterised monitoring no less than it did whole class teaching.

Alongside monitoring, another teaching element overdue for a re-think is *pace*. We are often told that teaching in other countries is 'pacier' than in Britain. But what does this mean? Greater organisational efficiency? More time on task and less distraction? It is true that the Vygotskian principle, that teaching is about accelerating children's development, is diametrically opposed to the familiar British belief in 'letting children learn at their own pace'. But this is a partial clue only, as our Indian evidence shows. In many of the Indian lessons, a fast interactive pace went hand in hand with considerable repetition, and - for rote learning is a very blunt instrument - the ratio of new knowledge to revision and practice might be low. More important than mere interactive pace, then, is *cognitive* pace, or the way that teaching introduces ideas, explores, tests and consolidates them, and progresses from one idea to the next. Cognitive pace is not about urging children to 'hurry up and finish because it's nearly playtime'. It's about the *density* of tasks and interactions rather than their mere speed.

Classroom talk can be *expository, interrogatory, exploratory, dialogic* or *evaluative*. That is, it may transmit information or explain ideas; it may entail the asking and answering of different kinds of questions; it

may offer opportunities for open-ended discussion; it may build up shared understanding through structured, challenging yet reciprocated talk; or it may weigh up and judge what has been said and done. All are necessary, but dialogue is the most difficult to achieve.

In our American and English lessons the video and transcript evidence at first sight looked promising, for there - especially in the US - classroom talk seemed open and conversational and teachers appeared to value negotiation more than direction. Democratising talk, we might suppose, is the basis for dialogue.

But conversation and dialogue are not the same. A conversation may go nowhere, while a dialogue, properly defined and conducted, always does. The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin argued that it is the act of questioning which differentiates dialogue from conversation. Dialogue is 'conversation and inquiry'. It combines the sociability of conversation with the skill of framing questions, constructing answers, and building on both. 'If an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself' says Bakhtin, 'it falls out of the dialogue'. Think of how often, in life as in classrooms, a promising line of enquiry is strangled at birth because discussants simply won't listen, preferring instead to talk at or past each other. They may know how to assert; perhaps even how to question; but not what to do with answers.

Learning demands not just talk but specific kinds of talk. The many examples of classroom talk from primary schools across the world with which *Culture and Pedagogy* culminates show just how much in this vital matter we can learn from others.

Moscow and Michigan: nine year olds solve problems

Teacher: Now here's another problem. Fifty chairs are distributed between two classrooms. When ten chairs are removed from one room the same number of chairs remain in each room. How many chairs did we start with? Can you work it out Yuri?

Yuri: Fifty minus ten equals forty. Forty must be divided by two, which means that you get twenty chairs if there are forty chairs distributed evenly.

Teacher: But that doesn't tell us how many we started with. What about the chairs left over?

Yuri: Well, in that case we must add ten to twenty, which would mean we started with thirty chairs in one room and twenty in the other.

Teacher: How can we check to see whether Yuri is correct?

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Teacher: Come on Cameron, turn around, be a good boy, so I can put your name on the happy face list. I don't have everybody's eyes up here, so I'm waiting. There. I wanted to buy fifty math notebooks. The notebooks came in packs of three, so when I bought them, I bought three in one pack. Here's the question. How many packs do I need to buy to make fifty? Work by yourself for five minutes, then if you want to talk with someone you may, to explain your solution. You need *problem, solution* and *explanation*. (To Frank) Where are you gonna begin?

Frank: Could this be a times problem?

Teacher: I don't know. What do you think?

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