DIALOGIC PEDAGOGY AT SCALE:
OBLIQUE PERSPECTIVES

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Evidence and practice: can the gap be closed?

Courtney Cazden and Bud Mehan – justly-honoured members of dialogic pedagogy's select group of 'onlie begetters' – end their prologue to this volume with a challenge. The *prima facie* case for a shift from recitation to reasoning in the world's classrooms is incontrovertible, yet 'we do not know from the information in the teacher-student exchanges alone what the students have learned toward particular curricular objectives. We also do not know if there is any correlation between the extent of individual students' verbal participation and their learning.'

Much of the rest of the book responds, albeit not explicitly, to Cazden's and Mehan's evidential challenge, to the extent that its cumulative thesis can be characterised thus. First, provided that it is authentically conceived and effectively fostered, the kinds of classroom talk examined here – dialogic, deliberative, argumentative, exploratory, reciprocal, accountable (to pluck but six typical terms from the book's linguistic lexicon) - provide tools for student engagement, learning and cognitive advancement of unique and undeniable power. In short – to add a triumphant seventh - such talk is *academically productive*. Second, the resulting cognitive and communicative gains transfer convincingly from one curriculum domain to another, and offer larger benefits for social cohesion, cultural engagement and democratic vitality. Third, the evidence available to support these claims is increasingly of a kind that should make even hardened sceptics take notice, especially those policymakers and functionaries whose vision of schooling rises no higher than how well students perform in standardised tests and how unquestioningly their teachers comply with what the common core ordains. To them this book confidently proclaims: high quality classroom talk raises educational standards, both those that can be tested and those for which more sophisticated forms of assessment are required.

Yet contributors also acknowledge that talk of the kind advocated here remains rarer than it should be or than in this era of 'evidence-informed practice' one might reasonably expect, and this evidence/practice shortfall has prompted the book's current section. Since in relation to the traditional diet of recitation/IRE both hard evidence and viable alternatives have been in the public domain for several decades, we have to ask why their impact remains so limited. Certainly, with so much evidence available it cannot be presumed that the problem will be solved by generating even more. The challenge now, contributors agree, is to mainstream what we know and what is done well so as to achieve a critical mass in both practice and evidence that will make wider pedagogical transformation unstoppable.

Hence the preoccupation with *scale*. The practice must be scaled up, we are told, while at the same time research on classroom talk should graduate from a scattered community of single-case cottage industries, however insightful these may be for those who already care, to a unified drive for data covering large populations. This, by sheer force of numbers and a

methodology which reduces classroom interaction to easily apprehended essentials and provides ready proof of concept and outcome, will make others care too. Or so it is believed.

Policy and pedagogy: heading in opposite directions?

But before we test the proposition and review responses to it, here's an illustration of why matters may not be that simple and why, in today's increasingly centralised, accountable and test-obsessed educational polity, engaging with policymakers and public understanding is no less important - and no less problematic - than scaling up the practice and research.

Immediately after the 2011 Pittsburgh conference that gave rise to this volume, I relayed its messages to education ministers in the British government, arguing that if, as they constantly asserted, ministers were concerned about national standards and international competitiveness in English language, mathematics and science, then the evidence about test gains from academically productive talk in these same subjects must on no account be ignored. And since, for better or worse, the requirements of England's national curriculum (equivalent to the common core standards in the United States) now shape the form of teaching as well as its content, it was essential to ensure that in this curriculum, and especially in its English/Language Arts requirements for 'speaking and listening', talk is profiled in a way which encourages a pedagogy of dialogue rather than mere recitation and recall (Alexander 2012a).

The government's initial response was positive. A high-level seminar of officials, academics and school leaders was convened at the Department for Education (DfE) in Westminster, with a senior government minister in attendance and Lauren Resnick contributing by videolink from Pittsburgh and hence providing a direct line to this volume, its parent conference and the corpus of research in question (Resnick 2011).

Following the DfE seminar, and armed with politician-friendly digests of the evidence and arguments, the minister encouragingly intimated that he understood the case and was persuaded by it. But, he added, he was reluctant to raise the curriculum profile of spoken language as required because this would divert teachers from their much more important task of raising standards in literacy. Worse, it would encourage (his fateful words) '*idle chatter in class*.'

'Idle chatter in class': the phrase is redolent of teaching in an era when the teacher imposed his truths and his will - the male possessive here is deliberate, for 'idle chatter in class' is a classic schoolmasterly put-down - on students who were to be firmly diverted from their natural inclination to idleness or worse, and by whom learning must be endured but not enjoyed.

So while being ostensibly persuaded, our champion of national educational reform in reality failed to get the point, or perhaps for other reasons was not prepared publicly to concede it. For him, literacy and oracy were not, as linguists and anthropologists understand them to be, overlapping and mutually supportive registers (Heath 1983, Goody 1987, Halliday 1989), but totally opposing worlds. Consequently, children would more speedily learn to read and write if they did so in silence. Meanwhile, all that we know about the cognitive, social and cultural power of talk and about its pivotal role in children's development, learning and understanding, let alone about the rigour of academically productive talk as chronicled in this volume, was at a stroke disowned as 'idle chatter.' This parody was subsequently reflected, albeit with concessions in response to the protests of myself and others (Alexander 2012b), in England's draft revised national curriculum (DfE 2013).

Leaving aside the question of whether the untutored prejudices of a government minister should form the basis for national policy we might note that the fears he expressed spoke to commonly-held perceptions and that these too need to be addressed if this book's aims are to be achieved. For our minister was harking back to the Victorian belief that while children in public elementary schools should learn to read, write, count and acquire their quota of facts, preservation of the social hierarchy that placed them there demanded that under no circumstances should they be exposed to the volatile possibilities of talk. The masses go to school to listen, repeat and memorise, not to discuss and above all not to question or argue.

Now as then, a pedagogy of recitation sustains and is sustained by a curriculum of proposition. So even while he was acknowledging but declining to act on the evidence on talk, our minister's officials were putting the finishing touches to a draft revised national curriculum for England that celebrated what ministers had called 'essential knowledge in the key subjects' of English, mathematics and science (DfE 2010). With disarming cultural insouciance 'essential' was defined by reference not to children's needs or national circumstances but to the published curriculum requirements of those nations and states that at that particular point in time happened to command the PISA podium. They had achieved that lofty status, we were to infer, not by effective pedagogy but by ruthlessly differentiating what in education is essential from what is not. Therefore, said England's education Secretary of State when he launched his first national curriculum draft, we must 'ensure that our children master the essential core knowledge which *other nations* pass on to their pupils' (his words, my incredulous italics). (DfE 2012).

To American readers this eccentric British response to the ubiquitous PISA panic, a classic *reductio ad absurdum*, may seem comfortably remote and perhaps in the telling a trifle over-egged, but the trajectory of recent school, curriculum and assessment reforms in the United States, as among other nation members of what Pasi Sahlberg (2011) calls the Global Education Reform Movement or GERM, offers no room for complacency (Ravitch 2011, 2013). For let us be in no doubt about a prominent contemporary truth: in so eagerly embracing high stakes testing, a narrow transmission curriculum and draconian teacher accountability measures, national education systems worldwide, but especially in Anglophone countries, are heading in the opposite direction to where, epistemologically and pedagogically, classroom dialogue and accountable talk ought to be taking them. Put another way: dialogue may be an educational truth universally acknowledged, but transmission/recitation offers superior political and electoral purchase.

In our conversation about scaling up dialogic research and practice we cannot afford to ignore these contrary trends. On the other hand, for as long as the policy route produces such an atavistic response, it may be prudent to remain below the parapet in case the 'accountable' in accountable talk triggers yet another fanatical gleam in the political eye. Dismissing talk as 'idle chatter' may offer a safer route to pedagogical reform than embracing it as fodder for high stakes tests.

Scaling up the research: can we reconcile linguistic authenticity and computational feasibility?

So scaling up remains, in this collection, the preferred route to talk reform and we turn now to some of the methodological challenges and possibilities.

Several of the studies in Part 3 are variations on a quantitative theme. That is to say, they tend to view scale as pre-eminently a statistical matter. Chiu puts this at its simplest when he

writes that qualitative studies may provide 'preliminary answers ... for a few cases' to the question of how to use talk to improve students' learning but what are needed are large datasets to test 'whether these apply across many people and many contexts.' To achieve this he coded videotaped conversation turns on five dimensions from 84 students.

Pauli and Reusser are more accepting of qualitative data and discuss the need to find the appropriate compromise between the claims of validity and time before opting, again, for coded videodata. Correnti *et al* focus not on student turns but on teacher moves, with 'initiating' and 'rejoinder' moves sub-categorised for coding and intended to capture 'more sophisticated interactions' than IRE. The study is methodologically heuristic, exploring a number of ways of handling data generated with the tool the team have developed and its resulting possibilities for bridging the divide between the study of teaching and its improvement. A different take again is offered by Matsumara's use of mediation analysis in the hope of avoiding simplistic attribution of cause and effect and instead teasing out direct and indirect influences in order to assess the impact on students' progress in literacy of coaching for discussion-based teaching.

While all the studies reported in Part 3 are clearly aware of the dangers of polarising 'qualitative' and 'quantitative', each sees the relationship differently, with Chiu coming closest to implying a hierarchy in which qualitative studies, simply because they don't deal with large populations, provide insight which can never be more than 'preliminary' to the higher-order findings of quantitative research.

In contrast, Carolyn Rosé neither posits nor implies a quantitative/qualitative duality or pecking order but instead exposes the dilemma that arises from the spectrum of phenomena to which particular methods attend and the accounts of reality they present. Tellingly setting up her paper as a conversation between sociolinguists and students of machine learning rather than a competition, she notes that 'there is always a tension between the preservation of complexity and the attainment of computational feasibility.' She insists that understanding language must come first, its representation for analysis and generalisation second: 'We need more insight into the language we are modeling so that we can be strategic in our introduction of complexity into the representation of the data'. Meanwhile she deplores 'blind faith in algorithms' and 'deficits in performance of the data' as a consequence of 'shallow representations of the text.'

Rosé's even-handed exploration of ways of scaling up discourse research without doing a grave injustice to the discourse that is its object exposes a problem to which we all need to attend. For where, in too many discourse studies at scale, are the linguists, socio or otherwise? Where are the meanings that talk expresses and exchanges and to which teaching is directed? Where is language itself? Further, it seems to me that in some coding frameworks there's more than an echo of the Flanderian paradigm for systematic interaction analysis which is tacitly framed by IRF, the very default that we seek to move beyond. More than one study here starts but also ends with what the teacher says or asks. In one, student utterances are limited to 'reply to teacher', 'reply to student', 'question' and 'suggestion', though the relative strength of student voice is hinted at in 'keyword giver' and 'equal partner'. But doesn't that 'suggestion' retain the submissiveness of transmission? If we are interested in dialogue, then surely the available codes should anticipate student talk of a comparable range and boldness to that of the teacher, and if we're interested in discussion and argumentation should we not include *in relation to student as well as teacher utterances* terms like 'explain', 'justify', 'assert', 'challenge' and even 'contradict', even if only to demonstrate how seldom these acts are witnessed?

In any event, the very notion of dialogue demands that we attend as closely to the character of students' contributions as to that of teachers' questions, and this I take to be the force of Mehan and Cazden's argument, in this book's Prologue, that 'the shift from recitation to reasoning also requires a shift in the way we analyse and display transcripts.' As Bakhtin warned (1986, 168) 'If an answer doesn't give rise to a new question from itself it falls out of the dialogue', yet still we make teacher talk, and especially teachers' questions, the centre of observational and analytical gravity, providing many more categories of teacher talk than of student talk and therefore allowing ourselves a far less nuanced study of the latter. Given that the power of talk for learning resides in what the *student* says, and that the teacher's task is to frame his or her own talk so that it provokes student talk that is cognitively rich and on which understanding can build, then the continuing dominance of teacher-centred coding systems seems somewhat perverse.

Then there's the apparent contradiction between the quest to reduce talk to a manageable number of moves in the interests of analytical feasibility at scale while elsewhere in this volume, and indeed in the present section, contributors argue that teachers need to understand and more fully exploit the rich possibilities of talk and study after study seeks to mirror these rich possibilities with commensurate analytical subtlety. If we return to the familiar implied quantitative/qualitative hierarchy, perhaps in light of the above we should reverse it. Qualitative or ethnographic analysis of human discourse isn't undertaken merely to illustrate or humanise supposedly higher order quantitative analysis. The one isn't the servant of the other. On the contrary, it's probably with ethnography and qualitative analysis that one should start: portraying the linguistic and paralinguistic whole before dissecting the parts; mining the interplay of locution, illocution and perlocution; capturing the essentials and essential relationships of spoken language as form, dynamics and meaning before reducing it to the point where it can be codified for examination with sufficiently large populations to enable reasonably secure generalisation. Only with this foundation is one in a position to determine which aspects of discourse must be retained within the methodological frame and which can safely be discarded. This particular conversation has some way yet to go.

Broadening the framework: discourse, pedagogy, culture

It is striking how few studies of classroom talk relate it to a context extending much beyond the interaction itself, and more specifically beyond the levels of 'move' and 'exchange'. (Halliday 1989). Yet, as we've been aware since IRE/F was first named, classroom talk not only encompasses everything from speech act to lesson form, but is also shaped by the unique and often eccentric forces of pedagogy – unique, because as Philip Jackson (1968) reminded us long ago, classrooms are not much like real life. Classroom talk is nested within, depends upon and speaks to teachers' handling of learning tasks, activities, time, space, relationships, pupil groupings, planning, assessment, lesson structure, the curriculum and the unspoken rules, routines and rituals that bind students and teachers together in a more or less conscious endeavour (Alexander 2001). And all are underpinned by values and assumptions about what education is for and what it means for students to know and understand.

Thus IRE/F is not so much a pedagogical aberration waiting to be exposed for the nth time by right-minded researchers as the practical expression of a view of knowledge as unarguable proposition and of teaching as the transmission of that knowledge from one generation to the next. Since many people subscribe to this view, especially in those wider political and public constituencies referred to earlier, scaling up demands attention to the epistemological framing of discourse as well as to its form and dynamics. From the vantage

point of such people a bid for more discussion and argumentation will look puzzling rather than progressive ('idle chatter in class'); or if there is to be discussion, it will be seen as a way to make transmission more efficient rather than to open the door to alternative accounts of learning and knowing.

The continuing hegemony of this view is, I sense, one reason why the coding frameworks of some quantitative studies, notwithstanding their dialogic aspirations, remain so one-sided. The IRF 'default option' (Cazden 2001) may pervade our own consciousness as researchers further than we care to admit. Understanding pedagogy as such is a *sine qua non* for understanding the talk that is pedagogy's chief instrument.

Maintaining a low profile in discourse research, too, are the wider culture and history within which classrooms, curricula, teaching, learning and talk are embedded. Talk mediates culture as well as pedagogy, yet the analysis of talk remains surprisingly insulated from the worlds that shape what goes on in classrooms and in larger measure shape the mindsets of teachers and students. These worlds are plural. Culture embodies sub-culture, mass and minority culture; if much teaching is determinedly monologic, classrooms are heteroglossic; professional culture features in the preceding chapters but student culture far less so, yet both shape classroom exchanges. Classroom talk can be analysed neither in a cultural vacuum nor by reference to a single tacitly normative speech register (that of the teacher), yet all too often it is; and while sociolinguistic research may capture its diversity and fluidity, coding systems may not, and can be surprisingly arbitrary in their focus on, say, turn or move. Indeed, such systems stand perpetually vulnerable to a charge of reductionism that is at least as serious as the curse of non-replicable singularity that hounds hapless ethnographers. No less important, once we include the talk-pedagogy-culture relationship within our investigatory framework, we understand that it is national culture as much as professional habit that embeds and eventually embalms particular models of teaching; that patterns and defaults presumed to be universal or unshakeable are not; that viable alternatives are readily available; and that provided we attend to the underlying principles rather than cherrypick the behaviours, there's a great deal we can learn from what is done and spoken elsewhere. (Alexander 2001, 2012c).

So in scaling up the datasets and systematising the means of creating them, we must take care not to scale up the conceptual and methodological limitations too. Usability cannot override authenticity. In both its research and practice accountable talk requires accountability not only to knowledge, standards of reasoning and the learning community (Michaels *et al* 2008) but also to language itself (Alexander 2010a).

Scaling up the practice: why is it so difficult?

Some answers to this question have already emerged and if we extend our methodological take on talk beyond talk itself we see that the list of obstacles to pedagogical transformation is headed by the contexts of policy and professional culture within which classroom decisions are made and by which all but the most determined and talented teachers are bound.

Thus, Osborne reminds us of the countervailing pressures of high stakes testing and a densely packed curriculum coupled with the continuing dominance of a transmission mindset that is particularly pervasive in the teaching of mathematics and science, and he underscores my central anxiety that at the present time policy and pedagogy are heading in opposite directions. Pauli and Reusser look to the structure of schooling itself, whose stratification, in Germany as in many other countries, conveys its own clear messages about

what classroom exchanges – and what students – count for more and less. Other contributors to Part 3 draw on their research studies to extend the list of factors and obstacles in a more local direction: teachers' prior experience and training, the quality of school leadership, principals' grasp of oral pedagogy and their willingness to support its more advanced forms; the constraints of time and syllabus; and – in the chapter from Michaels and O'Connor – the challenge that dialogue poses for students as well as teachers. This latter is an important corrective, for just as diagnoses in this area tend to be teacher-centred, so too are the pathologies and remedies.

And so on: the listed obstacles to change are many, considerable, familiar and to some extent generic. That is to say, they are of a kind that frustrates educational change beyond the domain of pedagogy as well as within it. One problem that gains perhaps insufficient attention in the particular context of talk reform is teachers' subject and pedagogical content knowledge, for these are major determinants of that part of classroom talk which deals with a subject's core principles, concepts and modes of enquiry. A teacher with total command of a subject is in a better position to take the risks that discussion entails, and to handle and build upon any contribution that a student makes. Indeed, if a teacher combines mastery with genuine enthusiasm he/she will positively welcome the unexpected and challenging student intervention as – to use Matsumara's term – grist to the discussion. If on the other hand I want to stay safely within the margins of my more restricted subject knowledge, I stick to IRE, because I get to ask the questions and the students don't, and I make sure that I only ask questions to which I know the answers.

Real mastery of a subject generates the degree of pedagogical confidence, freedom and flexibility that are preconditions for more open-ended talk, and it's therefore no coincidence that research on expert teachers identifies depth of engagement with what is to be taught as one of the key attributes differentiating the best teachers from the rest (Berliner 2004). Conversely, in my own work with elementary school teachers, who in Britain are subject generalists, not specialists, and are therefore potentially insecure in at least some of the subjects they teach, it has not been too difficult to help them change the environment and management of talk, making it – in terms of my five dialogic principles or criteria – more *collective, reciprocal* and *supportive*. But while these three relate to classroom dynamics the fourth principle – *cumulation*, which gathers together 'making connections', 'uptake' and 'handover' – is a much tougher nut to crack, because the point at which we try to make talk and the building of ideas and understanding cumulative is the point where the unlimited possibilities of talk meet the limitations of what the teacher knows. (Alexander 2008a, 2008b).

Thankfully, if the catalogue of challenges and obstacles to reform is daunting, there's no shortage in these chapters of promising solutions. Availing herself of outcome measures such as are surely a requirement for any research purporting to demonstrate a reform strategy's efficacy, Matsumara shows the positive impact of content-focused literacy coaching (CFC) on students' progress. Lampert *et al* argue that the process must start with a drive within initial teacher education to develop novice teachers as 'sense-makers' responsive to the dynamics and meanings of student contributions. Smith and Stein identify five practices that can assist teachers to balance direction and improvisation in handling class discussion: anticipating, monitoring, selecting, sequencing and connecting. Correnti *et al*, as noted earlier, seek to bridge the study of talk and its improvement, arguing that a single measure such as the one they develop for analysing teacher moves (ATM) can provide a tool for professional development as well as research. And for every strategy described in these chapters there are many more, on both sides of the Atlantic, which translate such ideas into print, audio-visual and on-line materials and professional development programs.

Shifting the centre of gravity back from teacher to student and building on their own such programs going back 20 years, Michaels and O'Connor start with the proposition that advancing beyond IRE is tough for students too and that genuine dialogue demands that they be helped to take over the 'heavy lifting' of explaining, justifying, critiquing and refining if they are to become autonomous reasoners and theorizers rather than mere answer-getters. Effective teachers, Michaels and O'Connor show, have a broad and flexible repertoire of talk moves (revoice, restate, apply, explain, challenge and so on) rather than an unwavering formula like recitation, but translating such moves into tools for the professional development of others is by no means easy and requires that they relate to goals for productive discussion and address teachers' fears about its conduct.

The indivisibility of dialogue

Reflecting on the strategic options persuasively exemplified in the preceding nine chapters, I wonder whether we have tended to aggravate the challenge of scaling up by presuming that we can move from localised research and development to universal acceptance and practice in just one step; and when we fail to do so the problem is the actors' resistance, fear or capacity rather than the methodology of scaling up itself. And why not countenance this diagnosis when, as this book's evidence and discussion constantly remind us, talk is at the same time the heart of pedagogy and one of its most complex, elusive and professionally demanding aspects?

Here, a promising corrective is available from the UK's Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF), an independent grant-making charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement by identifying promising educational innovations and working with their originators to translate these into packages which are explicitly designed with the needs and challenges of scale in mind and are then trialled and evaluated against both teacher development and student outcome measures, on the assumption that the latter requires the former.

At the time of writing, a UK-based university/local authority (school board) consortium is aiming to secure EEF funding to develop, apply and test a dialogic teaching package crystallised from a number of smaller-scale projects whose common feature has been the systematic, regular and cumulative use of video/CVD for professional self-study, mentoring and developmental target-setting in the domain of teacher-student and student-student talk, and which, according to independent evaluation, has generated a distinctive and professionally-embedded signature pedagogy, including in settings of acute social disadvantage (Alexander 2005a, 2005b, 2008b, Lefstein 2011, Lefstein and Snell, 2013). It will be piloted in about 20 schools, refined and subjected to randomised control trials in a further 50 or so, and depending on results will then be finalised before moving into commercial production for use at scale. Of course, all the caveats entered above apply, especially in relation to what sponsors see as the necessary task of quantifying the qualitative for the purposes of developing the required outcome measures, but the reduction of the exercise to a series of manageable steps aims both to safeguard process integrity and maximise ultimate prospects for success.

Yet perception remains an undeniable parallel challenge. Somehow we have to convince politicians, parents and perhaps some teachers themselves that dialogue and accountable talk are anything but idle or chatter and, even more fundamentally, that while scaling up may need to be carefully graduated, we are speaking of nothing less than a step change in epistemology and educational vision as well as, more obviously, pedagogy.

The Cambridge Primary Review, England's biggest elementary education enquiry for half a century, has sought to square the circle with this culminating aim in a set of twelve offering a new vision for public education:

> ***Enacting dialogue.*** To help children grasp that learning is an interactive process and that understanding builds through joint activity between teacher and pupil and among pupils in collaboration, and thereby to develop pupils' increasing sense of responsibility for what and how they learn. To help children recognise that knowledge is not only transmitted but also negotiated and re-created; and that each of us in the end makes our own sense out of the meeting of knowledge both personal and collective. To advance a pedagogy in which dialogue is central: between self and others, between personal and collective knowledge, between present and past, between different ways of making sense. (Alexander 2010b, 199).

This aim encompasses dialogue in both the specific sense of high quality classroom talk that has provided the focus for this book, and in the broader Bakhtinian sense of a particular stance on learning, teaching, knowledge, human relations, history and culture. Scale up the investigation and practice of accountable talk, certainly; but let's scale up our educational vision too.

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