

A: EXPLORING THE PRINCIPLES OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY

In inviting teachers to reflect on the extent to which formative assessment has been embedded in everyday classroom practice, unit B1 of the Highland Council CPD Reflection Framework poses the question: “So what are the pupils doing?” The question is important because it emphasises the real purpose of developing formative assessment as not being to improve teaching approaches for their own sake but in order to give children opportunities to engage more effectively in their own learning.

The role of dialogue in learning is a good example of this. As Professor Paul Black now acknowledges, earlier work on formative assessment tended to focus attention on how teachers could improve their questioning techniques and the kinds of questions they asked. If we want to engage children in their own learning, we need to build upon this early emphasis on questions and questioning and explore how we can develop dialogue in the classroom to the extent that it allows children to become more actively involved in their learning.

The following activity is supported by the section on Dialogic Teaching from Robert Fisher’s paper, Personalised Learning: a guide for teachers from Unit B2 of the Highland Council CPD Reflection Framework. The section provides useful background reading for the activity described below.

Assessing Dialogue

Alexander (2006, p30) describes five types of classroom talk, which can be summarised as follows:

1. ROTE (teacher-class): drilling of facts and ideas through repetition.
2. RECITATION (teacher-class or teacher-group): asking questions for recall or to cue pupil answers
3. INSTRUCTION/EXPOSITION (teacher-class, or teacher-group or teacher-individual): giving pupils information or explanations.
4. DISCUSSION (teacher-class, or teacher-group or pupil-pupil): sharing ideas and information and solving problems.
5. DIALOGUE (teacher-class, teacher-group, teacher-pupil or pupil-pupil): building a common understanding through structured questions and purposeful discussion.

The first three of these types of talk may have value, but if pupils’ are to take responsibility for their own learning they need to engage in formative discussion and dialogue with the teacher and with each other.

Think of a particular lesson, involving yourself and/or one of your colleagues, and

- decide on which of the above five best describes the classroom discourse
- reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the teacher’s talk, and consider how the dialogue might be improved.
- ask your colleague to make notes on the quality of the pupil contributions, concentrating on the language used and evidence of reasoned arguments and consider how they might be improved.

Dialogic Teaching

Research shows that the quality of classroom talk has the power to enable or inhibit cognition and learning. What stimulates thinking and learning are forms of instruction that can have come to be described as 'dialogic teaching'. Dialogic teaching builds upon a long tradition of theoretical and empirical work on the role of talk in learning and teaching, stretching back to Socrates. Recently key figures in research into the role of dialogue have included psycholinguists (Halliday, Wells), socio-linguists (Barnes), classroom researchers (Mercer, Galton, Alexander), discourse analysts (Sinclair, Coulthard, Dillon), cognitive and cultural psychologists (Vygotsky, Bruner) and educational philosophers including Bakhtin in Russia and Matthew Lipman, creator of Philosophy for Children, in America.

The classroom research suggests the sometimes problematic state of talk in UK classrooms and the need for it to be handled in radically new ways if its potential to promote and accelerate children's learning (Alexander 2004) is to be fully realised. Such research shows that schools and teachers often:

- view talk as a means of learning rather than an objective of learning
- fail to integrate talk effectively in developing literacy
- do not fully exploit the learning potential of talk for learning across the curriculum
- focus more on written than oral learning tasks and modes of assessment
- emphasise the social and affective functions of talk rather than the cognitive
- use forms of teaching and classroom organisation not conducive to sustained group dialogue
- rather use closed questions inviting recall, encouraging brief answers involving exchange of information rather than speculation and problem-solving
- limit 'thinking time' for pupil thinking (and do not model teacher thinking)
- use feedback to praise and supports rather than diagnose and inform
- evidence many teacher questions from but few from pupils
- show little systematic building upon answers to construct extended lines of reasoning and enquiry
- fail to make students aware of the ground rules of effective dialogue

Dialogic teaching takes place alongside more familiar kinds of teaching talk such as rote, recitation, exposition and discussion. It is less a specific strategy than a range of strategies that make for cognitively-challenging interaction in the classroom. Dialogic teaching harnesses the power of talk to engage children, stimulate and extend their thinking, and advance their learning and understanding. Not all classroom talk secures these outcomes, and some may even discourage them. According to Alexander (2004) dialogic teaching rests on five key principles:

- collective: teachers and children address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class;
- reciprocal: teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints;
- cumulative: teachers and children build on their own and each others' ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry;
- supportive: children articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over 'wrong' answers; and they help each other to reach common understandings;
- purposeful: teachers plan and steer classroom talk with specific educational goals in view.

Dialogic teaching requires particularly close attention to:

- the different contexts of talk – whole class, collective (teacher-led) group, collaborative (pupil-led) group, individual;
- the purpose of questions (e.g. elicitation, recall, instruction, management, routine, probing) and their structure (e.g. closed, open, directive, leading, narrow, discursive);
- the form of answers (e.g. factual, analytical, speculative, hypothesising, evaluative) and their length;
- the feedback which answers receive (e.g. evaluative, motivational, diagnostic, neutral);
- the way answers are built upon in order to take thinking forward;
- the length of exchanges;
- roles and procedures for pupil-pupil discussion;
- classroom climate and relationships;
- classroom organisation and layout;
- lesson planning and structure;

- the teacher subject knowledge needed for extended exchanges;
- ground rules governing the effective conduct of dialogic talk in classroom settings (attending, listening, speaking loudly and clearly, respecting alternative viewpoints etc).

Dialogic and other talk

Most teaching starts by drawing on a basic repertoire of three kinds of classroom talk:

- rote (teacher-class): the drilling of facts, ideas and routines through 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.

These provide the familiar and traditional bedrock of teaching by direct instruction. Less universally, some teachers, but by no means all, also use:

- discussion (teacher-class, teacher-group, pupil-pupil): the exchange of ideas with a view to sharing information and solving problems.
- scaffolded dialogue (teacher-class, teacher-group, teacher-pupil, or pupil-pupil): achieving common understanding through structured and cumulative questioning and discussion which guide and prompt, reduce choices, minimise risk and error, and expedite 'handover' of concepts and principles.

The two groups are not mutually exclusive, and the argument is not that rote, recitation and exposition should be abandoned. All five have their place. Dialogic talk, therefore, is part of the larger oral repertoire which is needed in order that schools may meet the diverse objectives of a broad curriculum, and so that children may be empowered both in their learning now and later as adult members of society.

But talk empowers socially as well as cognitively, and children themselves need to acquire the capacity to:

- narrate
- explain
- instruct
- ask different kinds of question
- receive, act and build upon answers
- analyse and solve problems
- speculate and imagine
- explore and evaluate ideas
- discuss, argue, reason and negotiate

and, in order that they can do this effectively with others:

- listen
- be receptive to alternative viewpoints
- think about what they hear
- give others time to think.

The quality of classroom talk depends on many factors: the speaking and listening skills of children and teachers, teachers' subject knowledge (for taking children's thinking forward requires a clear conceptual map of the directions which that thinking should take), classroom climate, classroom organisation, and so on. The indicators below are placed in two groups. The first group deals with the wider context within which dialogic teaching is placed. The second group lists some of the main properties of the talk which provides the core of dialogic teaching.

Dialogic teaching is indicated by:

Teacher-pupil interaction (for example in whole class and collective - teacher-led - group settings) in which:

- questions are structured so as to provoke thoughtful answers and answers provoke further questions and are seen as the building blocks of dialogue
- individual teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil exchanges are connected into coherent lines of enquiry

- there is a balance between the social and the cognitive purposes of talk, between encouraging participation and structuring understanding;
- pupils, not just teachers, are encouraged to ask questions and provide explanations
- those who are not speaking participate no less actively by listening, looking, reflecting and evaluating,
- the classroom is arranged so all can see and respond to each other
- all are encouraged speak clearly, audibly and expressively;
- children have the confidence to make mistakes, and understand that mistakes are viewed as something to learn from, not be ashamed of.

Pupil-pupil interaction (for example, in collaborative group settings) in which children listen carefully to each other; encourage each other to participate and share ideas; build on their own and each others' contributions; strive to reach common understanding and agreed conclusions, yet respect minority viewpoints.

Teacher-pupil one-to-one monitoring which lasts for long enough to make a difference; is instructional rather than merely supervisory and provides diagnostic feedback on which children can build.

Questioning (whether in whole class, group or individual interactions) which: is anchored in the context and content of the lesson; builds on previous knowledge; elicits evidence of children's understanding; combines invitations for closed / narrow and open / discursive / speculative responses (what is?' and 'what might be?' questions); combines the routine and the probing; uses cued elicitations and leading questions sparingly rather than habitually; prompts and challenges thinking and reasoning; balances open-endedness with guidance and structure in order to reduce the possibility for error; and achieves consistency between its form and intent (e.g. where questions are questions rather than instructions, and open questions are genuinely open, rather than invitations to guess the one 'right' answer).

Responses to questioning which: address the question in the depth it invites rather than worry about spotting the 'correct' answer; move beyond yes/no or simple recall to extended answers involving reasoning, hypothesising and 'thinking aloud'; and are considered and discursive rather than brief and prematurely curtailed.

Feedback on responses which: replaces the monosyllabically positive, negative or non-committal judgement (e.g. repeating the respondent's answer) by focused and informative diagnostic feedback on which pupils can build; uses praise discriminatingly and appropriately, and filters out the routine use of 'wow', 'fantastic', 'good boy', 'good girl', 'very good', 'excellent' etc; keeps lines of enquiry open rather than closes them down; and encourages children to articulate their ideas openly and confidently, without fear of embarrassment or retribution if they are wrong.

Pupil talk through which children: narrate, explain, instruct, ask different kinds of question, receive, act and build upon answers, analyse and solve problems, speculate and imagine, explore and evaluate ideas, discuss, argue, reason and justify and negotiate.

Good talk does not always just happen – it needs to be planned. Good questioning promotes children's understanding and does not merely test their recall of information. Such questioning can improve comprehension in reading and writing as well as in talk. The quality of children's talk is greatly enhanced if children are given time to think. Discussion increases pupil's access to learning.

Talking before writing helps children to think, and then write, in sentences. Shifting the proportion of time in a writing lesson away from the writing itself and towards the talk actually benefits the writing.

Talk is a powerful tool for raising the confidence of children with special needs and those with low self-esteem. Children enjoy and are stimulated by well-structured oral lessons, and they readily adapt to the rather different ground rules which are necessary for such lesson to run smoothly.

Though the assumption that written work is the only 'real' work is deeply ingrained, children come to appreciate that talk is work too, especially if it requires the kind of self-discipline which is normally associated with written tasks.

Questions

- What is the best way of organising the class for group discussion?
- What are the best conditions for whole class dialogue?
- How can we ensure that collaborative (pupil-led) group work is as disciplined and productive? What kinds of tasks are appropriate? What kinds of skills do participants need? How can they be developed?
- Dialogic teaching encourages us to reduce the dominance of ‘Now who can tell me...?’ questions followed by bidding, and to use more focused questions linked to the nomination of specific children. what is the right balance of bidding and nomination, and how is each of them best used?
- What kinds of questioning promotes children’s understanding? What is the right balance of questioning and exposition? When should we question and when should we tell, inform or explain?
- What kind of feedback informs and extends as well as encourages.
- What are the differences between talk, discussion and dialogue?

References

- Alexander R.J. (2004) *Towards Dialogic Teaching*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Faculty of Education
- Fisher R. (2006) ‘Creative Dialogue: developing children’s minds through talk’, *Teaching Thinking & Creativity*, Vol 7, No 1 pp16-22