

Why talk is important

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ABSTRACT: In this brief retrospective essay, the value of a particular kind of classroom talk is extolled – not the kind of talk that simply feeds back information, but rather talk that has the power to shape knowledge through participant engagement with a range of processes: hypothesising, exploration, debate and synthesis. This kind of talk is the antithesis to “right answerism” and facilitates learning which is active and which prepares young people for a complex world with many uncertainties and many occasions when rational choice is required.

KEYWORDS: Exploratory talk, understanding, learning, knowledge.

It is worth considering what is implied when, after someone has asked you to make a decision, you reply, “I’d like to talk it over first”. It’s not that you expect that the talk will give you new information. It’s rather that you know from experience that the matter in question can often appear quite differently as a result of talking it through. The situation and its priorities and implications can take a different shape, a different meaning. You may see connections that were not immediately apparent, or realise that some of the options might have results that need to be considered. In that case, the talking is contributing to your understanding by reshaping what you already in a sense “know”. This provides a useful model for the function of talk in learning, in that some kinds of talk contribute to understanding without necessarily adding new material. Of course, talk or writing of the kind that is essentially giving back to the teacher what he or she has already told you – “right answerism” – is quite different. This kind of rehearsal has a value in reinforcing memory but is not likely to advance understanding.

It has to be acknowledged that talk is not the only way of working on our understanding of a topic. The kind of writing that is a tool of problem-solving will do it, or manipulating figures while working on a mathematical problem. Diagrams may be used in this way too: interactive whiteboards are designed to support just that kind of manipulation, so that they provide a valuable basis for discussion. What all of these have in common is that they are ways of representing a situation in such a way that the elements in it can be moved about, set into new relationships, and reinterpreted. However, talk has the advantage (compared with the other modes) that it is easy and impermanent. We can try out an idea and change it even as we speak. Exploratory talk is important in learning because it provides a ready tool for trying out different ways of thinking and understanding.

There can be a natural sequence in lessons. There is much to be said for beginning new work by eliciting from the class what they know already about the matter. Then there often follows a stage of presentation. If this is based on diagrams or apparatus it can include inviting the pupils to interpret the evidence before them, or to offer hypotheses about what will happen when changes are made. The third stage might be called “exploration”, and this can be best carried out through talk, though it can also

include writing. This is the stage in which the new ideas or information or judgments are brought into relation with what the pupils previously believed to be the case. Although some new information fits comfortably into what we know already, many new ideas do not. With these, we have to allow the new to interact with what we thought we knew and move to a new synthesis. This may involve a major change of understanding, perhaps even a profound revision of how we see the world. This is unlikely to happen instantaneously, for the learners will need some time to explore the implications of new ideas in a discussion led by the teacher. With some classes it is useful to set up small-group discussions at this stage, but there will always need to be a time when the teacher leads the class to review what has been learnt, since this provides an opportunity for emphasis, clarification and perhaps correction. Finally, it is likely to be useful to ask the class to write at length. However, it is important to give enough time to the two discussion stages. Asking pupils too soon to summarise what they have learnt, perhaps by writing a formal report, is to expect them to arrive without having travelled.

There are undoubted advantages in occasionally breaking up a class into groups to discuss a problem or work at a task, and, as I suggested above, there is a point in a sequence of teaching at which it is particularly appropriate, that is, when it is necessary for each pupil to relate new ways of thinking to his or her existing preconceptions. Problem-solving in small groups has the virtue of involving all the pupils in discussion, and encourages the kind of exploratory talk that some pupils are hesitant to embark on when all their peers are listening. Nevertheless, it is only likely to be effective when the pupils' interest has already been engaged in the subject matter, so it is not always appropriate. Clearly such discussions can only go so far; it is essential that eventually the group returns to the whole class so that a "common knowledge" (Edwards & Mercer, 1987) can be established through exchanges between teacher and pupils.

It is worth asking just how exploratory talk can contribute to the quality of learning. When we talk about "learning" we are referring not merely to one intellectual activity but to a varied family of activities. There is, for instance, a kind of learning that goes little beyond rote; we retain information long enough to pass the test and then forget it because it has not found a context in what we know already, has not linked with the knowledge of the world that shapes judgments and actions in our daily lives. If teachers put too much emphasis upon "right answers" rather than on discussion, it may encourage pupils to think that this kind of knowledge is what schooling is all about. Rote knowledge has its uses, and in some cultures is indeed highly valued, but in the UK we are preparing young people for a complex world with many uncertainties and many occasions when rational choice is required. In such a society, we need people who can think for themselves, and make informed judgments. Unfortunately, many young people bring to school unhelpful preconceptions about learning, drawn from quizzes, and they will need help in understanding that passive memorising is not what is required.

The kind of learning outlined in a previous paragraph is the richest and most valuable kind, and it would be good if all pupils could understand that this is the ideal to be aimed at. Clearly it does not happen without the active participation of the learners themselves, though that word "active" itself demands further analysis and explanation. As a teacher, I know too well how easy it is to switch into what might be

called The Instructor Mode and lay out an official account and test the pupils on their ability to reproduce it as presented. But if we want understanding in depth, we should rather be leading them by question and example to look critically at the account and see how far it matches their existing perceptions of the world and how far it challenges it. Of course, subjects vary. It is a very different matter helping boys and girls to consider arguments for and against (for example) a law controlling motorists' behaviour, and offering them evidence so they can look critically at their preconceptions about the way liquids behave under pressure. Yet understanding the basis for taking up one view of the matter or another is as important in the physical sciences as in the social.

Most teachers will say that they value "active learning", but not all are clear about what they mean by that. It certainly does not necessarily mean moving about the room or manipulating objects. I became sharply aware of the importance of active learning many years ago when two groups of teachers following courses helped me to record and analyse lessons taught during the first week or two to pupils who had just begun secondary schooling. We were all surprised and disturbed by the passivity of the pupils. It was when we looked at the teachers' questions that the reason for this became clear. We distinguished "closed" questions, which required no more than a brief answer giving some fact, from "open" questions, to which a range of answers were possible (Barnes, Britton & Torbe, 1990). The closed questions predominated, so that pupils were not being invited to think aloud. In only one or two of the lessons we recorded were pupils invited to talk their way through a problem or a task, and these were mainly in maths and science lessons. Otherwise the teachers talked most of the time, and pupils hardly ever asked a question or otherwise instituted an exchange. In fact, in most lessons they had no opportunity to talk their way into understanding, being asked only to recollect what they had been told. It was this that persuaded me that teachers should think again about the role played by talking and writing in their lessons.

The other teachers and I agreed that this contrasted sharply with the way we ourselves tackled a learning task. Good learners (Baird & Mitchell, 1986) ask questions, raise difficulties, look for examples that support or seem to contradict, put forward hypotheses, suggest explanations, offer evidence and so on. They try to link new knowledge with what they already know, finding relationships even with ideas that are not necessarily relevant to the subject in hand, but important to them as individuals. They notice good examples of the principles they are learning about, but at the same time notice situations where it would not apply, so that they contextualise their new knowledge and understand its limits. They are able to explain the meaning and significance of the new knowledge, and to identify those areas where they are not certain they understand.

Moreover, pupils should be encouraged, too, to look critically at what they are told, should be given the opportunity to understand at their own level the evidence supporting it and probe points of weakness in it. We live in a world open to alternative explanations and judgments. This applies to social, moral and physical reality, and we should not try to deceive young people into thinking otherwise. That is what I meant by "active" learning – learning in which the learners engage with the subject matter in a way that will shape how they retain and use what they have learnt.

Recently a new emphasis has appeared in the discussion of the role of talk in teaching and learning. Robin Alexander carried out a large-scale study of primary education in six countries (Alexander, 2001), and his analysis of the differences is enlightening in many ways. Here I want to pick out solely his discovery of a characteristic of teaching in the UK and the US that contrasts with teaching in, for example, France and Russia. In the UK and the US, teachers try to interact with as many members of a class as possible, shooting short questions at different pupils to keep their attention. (It seems possible that this is part of the reason for the passivity I had found many years ago.) In France and Russia, there is a tendency to pursue a line of thought with one or two pupils, leading them to analyse the topic in hand at some depth, while other members of the class are expected to attend closely to the development of the argument. This implies that a teacher's response to a pupil's reply should not be merely an evaluative "Good!" followed by a question to another pupil. Instead the first question should be followed by another that invites the same pupil to develop the thought further, perhaps by expanding the original point to make it more explicit, by offering a justification, or by exploring an implication. Alexander's view is that such an approach leads to better intellectual engagement with what is being taught.

This kind of teaching is not easy; but then no good teaching is easy. Whether in primary school, secondary school, or further or higher education a teacher has the responsibility of preparing young people for a complex world in which they are already — whatever their ages — having to make important choices. It is important not to let them down by over-simplifying the various pictures of reality that are offered to them.

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