Why Oracy Must Be in the Curriculum (and Group Work in the Classroom)

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ABSTRACT In this article it is argued that the development of young people's skills in using spoken language should be given more time and attention in the school curriculum. The author discusses the importance of the effective use of spoken language in educational and work settings, considers what research has told us about the factors that make group discussions productive or otherwise and outlines the practical guidance that research can provide for teachers on such matters. On this basis, the author suggests that recent actions by the Westminster government to devalue 'speaking and listening' in the National Curriculum are seriously misguided, as also are the polemical attacks on group-based activity in the classroom mounted by government supporters.

Introduction

Talk enables people to work together to solve problems and get things done. The capability to plan our actions and review them collectively is unique to humans; it is linked to the evolution of language itself (Mercer, 2013). Language is our prime tool for thinking collectively: we do not just use language to interact, we use it to 'interthink' (Littleton & Mercer, 2013). But like most tools, we have to learn how to use it well. The effective use of spoken language is as important today as it ever was, and so young people need to be educated in ways of using language to get things done. We cannot assume that they will pick up the necessary skills in their lives outside school. However, not enough attention is given in educational policy and practice to helping children to develop their communicative skills. Many educational policy makers, and critics of educational research in the media (in the United Kingdom at least), seem to remain unconvinced that students' talk should be encouraged in the classroom or that oracy (spoken language skills) should be given the same kind of attention that everyone accepts should be given to literacy and numeracy.

After about thirty years of studying talk in schools and the development of children's language and reasoning, I am sure they are wrong – as I will explain.

Are Two Heads Better Than One?

One of the most common ways people use talk to get things done is in some kind of meeting or group discussion. The value of effective teamwork has become widely recognised in many industries in recent years. At their best, teams are excellent creative problem-solving units, proving that two (or more) heads are better than one. It has also become more widely appreciated that great ideas in the arts and sciences are rarely the product of a lone genius, but usually arise from interactions between members of creative intellectual communities (John-Steiner, 2006). Some of the most innovative and successful companies, such as Google and McKinsey, make special efforts to encourage and enable creative, team-based activity. This is why many employers commonly say that they want to recruit graduates who not only have relevant technical knowledge and skills, but who are effective communicators and team players. An expert report on skills for employability commissioned by the London Chamber of Commerce stated: 'Softer skills, such as team working and communication, are an important aspect of an individual's employability, and they will be in higher demand as we move towards a more knowledge-intensive economy' (Wright et al, 2010, p. 8).

The importance of skills in effective team working and collective problem-solving is, ironically, highlighted by the fact that even highly qualified groups of people can fail to use available information to make sensible decisions. In his pioneering work, the psychologist Janis (1972) used documentary evidence to try to understand why some grave errors of judgement had been made and carried through at senior level within the American government – such as the decisions during the 1960s to invade Cuba and to continue the war in Vietnam when it seems so much evidence available at the time militated against such actions. Janis concluded that one important reason was that the teams working with senior decision makers did not engage in proper, evidence-based, rational discussions. Instead, government ministers and their close advisors tended to talk only to each other and exclude 'outsiders', however well qualified and informed those outsiders might be. Any views of outsiders which conflicted with the in-group consensus were rejected out of hand – or were not even sought at all. Typically, more junior members tried to show that they were loyal supporters of the powerful by always agreeing with leaders, rather than offering constructive criticisms. Group members commonly worked to maintain solidarity and avoid any dissent. Because of these factors, when trying to make a decision, groups often reached decisions quickly, with disastrous results. The dynamic processes of the group created obstacles to the identification of the best solutions to the problems they were dealing with. In other words, some unspoken 'ground rules' were governing the way discussions were being conducted, suppressing certain useful features of discussion and

encouraging others which did not favour the pursuit of rational outcomes. Janis called this unfortunate phenomenon 'groupthink'. Other research (as reviewed in Littleton and Mercer, 2013) has suggested this phenomenon is not limited to government problem-solving and decision-making groups. Taken in conjunction with research findings about the positive, creative value of collective thinking discussed earlier, it seems that groups achieve some of the best, and some of the worst, outcomes when it comes to learning from experience and solving human problems (Baron, 2005). It is important that we understand why.

What Enables Productive Discussion, and What Prevents It?

Some rather strident critics of UK educational research and practice have recently argued that group work is, educationally, a waste of time and teachers should eschew it in favour of whole-class teaching. Bennett (2014), for example, takes this position, as does Peal (2014), who says, 'Whenever I am asked where the group work is in my lessons, I respond with the same answer. The class have been put into a group of 30, and their group task is to listen to the teacher and to work in silence'. Although their polemic often includes an attack on educational research, their viewpoint is, to an extent, justified by the findings of that research. Observational studies (as reviewed by Littleton and Howe, 2010) have shown that, in many classrooms, for much of the time, group work is not very productive. And it seems that many teachers, like Bennett and Peal, find it hard to manage. But in contrast to what those critics claim (based on their unjustifiable insistence that any valid social scientific research must be based on a randomised controlled trial), there is also substantial empirical research to show that collaborative learning can be very beneficial for learning (see, for example, Slavin, 2009; Howe, 2010). In fact, like the findings of research with adult working teams discussed earlier, the results of research on the value of collaborative learning in schools are apparently paradoxical, supporting both the value of group work and pointing to its common failure to be productive. This paradox can be resolved simply by admitting that group work varies in quality: as in the nursery rhyme, 'when it is good, it is very, very good, but when it is bad it is horrid'. By using research evidence we can identify one reason why group work is often unproductive in both the workplace and in school, which is that group members are not using the most appropriate ground rules to manage their discussions. This is not surprising if they have not learned, or been taught, how to do so effectively. Would we expect children to be good at geometry or essay writing if they were not taught the rules, were not given time to practise or given feedback on their efforts? To be logically consistent, critics like Bennett and Peal should be saying that because many children enter secondary school unable to perform well in team sports like football or hockey, those sports should be dropped from the curriculum. In reality, their comments about the problems of group work simply reflect poor teaching: they are failing to teach children how to work well with

others, and so they blame their students for the poor quality of group work. This is somewhat shameful.

The research on 'groupthink' discussed earlier suggests that even highly educated people may not be fully aware of how best to use talk to get things done. A respected head teacher, Ros McMullen, has reported her own dire experience on 'a course designed for senior leaders ... that I unfortunately attended and that was based on Gestalt principles: I remember spending 5 days watching bullies given the freedom to bully in complete horror' (McMullen, 2014). It is not only schoolchildren who need oracy training. School-based research has shown that one reliable way to make group work more effective is to first help students become aware of how they usually communicate in groups, and then agree on a more suitable set of 'ground rules' for how they can talk more productively together. They should then be given the opportunity to try these rules out on a range of curriculum-related problems. If they come to find that following the rules is beneficial, they will be motivated to change their behaviour. The most useful ground rules are those that will avoid the factors that encourage 'groupthink' and other features of poor discussions, and instead generate talk which is inclusive, rational and productive. The result is that they are more likely to be effective at finding good, creative solutions to problems. Such ground rules would include:

- all voices in the group are heard and taken into account;
- all relevant ideas and information are shared and justified with reasons whenever possible;
- ideas and proposals offered can (and should) be criticised if there are good reasons to do so;
- members can express ideas openly in an atmosphere of mutual trust, in the interests of achieving the group's collective success;
- the group should try to seek consensus about any outcomes for which they are jointly responsible (Littleton & Mercer, 2013, pp. 106-107).

My colleagues and I have seen the quality of group discussion transformed over the course of a school term by teachers raising students' awareness of how they talk in groups, introducing the ground rules, setting up suitable opportunities for practice and – not least – being a good role model for how to use talk effectively to get things done. In research in American schools, Webb (2009) found that the strongest influence on how school students talked to each other in groups was how their teachers talked to them.

What Spoken Language Skills
Do Young People Need to Learn?

I mentioned earlier that employers say they wish to find that their recruits have skills related to customer handling, communication, problem-solving and working effectively with others in a team, but employers also report a shortage of such skills amongst recruits. As recently reported on BBC Radio 4 (BBC,

2014), the Confederation of British Industry and the National Union of Teachers, for once speaking in unity, condemned the recent decision by the Westminster government to remove the assessment of 'speaking and listening' from English General Certificate of Secondary Education examinations, because of the effects that is likely to have in reducing any educational focus on the 'soft' or 'generic' skills which are vital for many kinds of work (and for full participation in democracy). Once we start to look carefully at what these skills are, it becomes apparent that a whole range of speaking and listening capabilities are involved, not just those required for group discussions. By being helped to understand how to use talk for communicating, learning and problem-solving and by responding to feedback from each other and their teachers on how well they do so, students can develop those generic skills. It seems clear that all schools should be teaching young people how to use talk effectively in a range of situations. We might note that the elite 'public schools' of the private sector, which have educated so many members of the current Westminster government, place a high value on the development of confidence and competence in using spoken language. Yet that same government sees fit to reduce and devalue 'speaking and listening' in the National Curriculum (which 'public' schools do not have to teach; the National Curriculum is only for ordinary children, not for those of the political elite).

Through working closely with expert teachers, my colleagues and I have collected and created a whole range of 'thinking together' activities which help to develop students' awareness and skill in using talk. These are available in several publications (for example, Dawes, 2008, 2012) and are described on our website .[1] As well as the skills of productive discussion, students also should be taught how to make public presentations and how to provide clear guidance and instructions. Effective ways of teaching such skills have been developed by those schools which have bravely implemented an 'oracy-led curriculum', such as School 21.[2] It is reassuring that there is recognition from some influential quarters that developing oracy skills constitutes good practice, as shown by the Office for Standards in Education's report that School 21 was 'outstanding in every category' and its students 'develop extraordinary skills in listening, speaking and questioning' (Office for Standards in Education, 2014).

If oracy is to be given a more significant place in the curriculum of most schools, many teachers probably need to have a clearer idea of what skills their students should be helped to develop, and also need to know how to monitor and assess those skills. This has been the stimulus for a project my Cambridge colleagues Paul Warwick, Ayesha Ahmed and I completed recently in partnership with School 21 and with funding from the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF). We have created an Oracy Skills Framework which covers the range of skills people need across different contexts. This provides the basis for a practical Oracy Assessment Toolkit for teachers, which is now available.[3]

The Wider Educational Benefits of Developing Oracy

The teaching (and assessment) of oracy is self-evidently necessary because of the communicative importance of spoken language for life in general. But there are also other, less obvious reasons for giving the development of talk skills more prominence in school. Developing oral language skills has been shown to help raise students' attainment in several subjects. 'Oral language interventions' (such as *Thinking Together* and *Philosophy for Children*) are now included in the top 10 most impactful educational practices in the Sutton Trust-EEF *Teaching and Learning Toolkit* (EEF, 2014). Psychological and educational research in the socio-cultural tradition, based on Vygotsky's work (e.g. Vygotsky, 1962), has shown that the development of children's reasoning and self-regulatory abilities is linked to their use of spoken language (Whitebread et al, 2013). By learning how to reason effectively with others, and through the dialogic guidance of their teachers, they can learn to reason more effectively alone (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Mercer, 2013). Developing the capacity to reason is a crucial life skill which can profoundly alter children's future prospects. This kind of experience is likely to have the most beneficial effects on children from home backgrounds in which speech genres like 'reasoned discussion' are rarely heard, and in which carers might not themselves have had good opportunities to develop their spoken language repertoires. In seeking to find solutions for the underachievement of white working-class children, a Parliamentary Select Committee on Education report recently made special mention of School 21's oracy curriculum and our research at Cambridge (Select Committee on Education, 2014).

It would be most unfortunate, then, if teachers responded to the polemic of ill-informed media critics and eliminated group work from their classroom practice. Yes, they should be concerned if children are wasting time in groups, and concerned too if that means their students lack the skills to work collaboratively. But they should be reassured that there are practical ways of teaching their students how to make group work effective (and of teaching other important talk skills, such as those involved in presentation and instruction). The case for giving more direct attention to the development of children's spoken language abilities is so compelling that it was very difficult indeed to understand the then Secretary of State's strenuous refusal during the consultations of 2012-13 to consider the evidence offered him by me, and by other researchers and practising teachers, as to why 'speaking and listening' should remain prominent in the National Curriculum. Presented with this evidence, he and his ministers remained steadfast in their view that more talk in the classroom must inevitably mean more 'idle chat', and that 'Children naturally learn to talk; they do not naturally learn to read, or to play the violin, or to carry out long division' (Gove, 2013). One can only live in hope – for the sake of the future of the young people of our nation – that a greater receptiveness to evidence leads to more enlightened policies being pursued by Mr Gove's successors at the Department for Education.

Note

[1] http://thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk

[2] See http://school21.org/21st-century-approach

[3] See http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/oracytoolkit/

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