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EDITORIAL

Improving on the Silence: talk in classrooms

'What you askin' me for?', said Sylve a long time ago, and with a snarl. 'You're the teacher. You've gotta take it out of your head and put it into mine. That's your job.' Fortunately, Sylve wasn't talking to me. In the fictional comprehensive school whose workings David Leland anatomised in *Birth of a Nation*, one of a quartet of television dramas broadcast in 1983, Sylve was just another alienated Fifth Year who might or might not be entered for CSEs (Certificate of Secondary Education examinations). She was addressing her English teacher, the neophyte Geoff Figg, perhaps so named because he's one of the few on the staff who actually seems to give one. Figg casts around for ways to engage Sylve and her written-off classmates. Against the odds, he wants them to see that what they know and how they think can be built on in school. In the face of Sylve's blunt reminder of his role, Figg chalks on the board a list of topics for discussion, and asks his class simply to talk together.

Perhaps he'd read his Harold Rosen. 'We are saying that it is as talkers, questioners, arguers, gossips, chatterboxes, that our pupils do much of their most important learning. Their everyday talking voices are the most subtle and versatile means they possess for making sense of what they do, and for making sense of others' (Barnes et al, 1971, p. 127). Rosen's contribution, on behalf of the London Association of Teachers of English, to the revised edition *of Language, the Learner and the School*, published in 1971 and from which these words are taken, argued that the classroom should become a place where children could learn by being enabled to talk in a much wider range of ways than was then customary.

For however Twitter-friendly it is, Sylve's job description won't do. The assumptions which inform it about teaching, learning, knowledge and curriculum turn out to be worse than useless if the aim is to exploit the potential of talking for thinking and learning. Some of those assumptions are dramatised in Leland's imaginary school. There, in classrooms deemed well run, teachers permit students to talk only in a narrow range of licensed ways, chief among which is to answer a question put by a teacher. For the most part, what is heard

in these classrooms is the teacher's voice. Or silence. A silent classroom must be a hardworking classroom, and that must mean students are learning.

Leland's play suggests how dubious were such views and practices. Several contributors to this issue of *FORUM* reveal how a more adventurous openness to the benefits of talk for learning in contemporary classrooms can improve on the silence. John Gordon looks at the essential role to be played by the teacher in skilfully eliciting and making use of students' prior knowledge during discussion, and in shaping that discussion to help individuals work towards a deeper understanding of a demanding canonical text. In doing so he exposes shortcomings which underlie claims for the importance of 'core cultural knowledge' in enabling such understanding.

Linda Hargreaves and Rocío García-Carrión make use of quantitative as well as qualitative approaches when they analyse a particular talking practice. By counting who says what, and in how many words, they can reckon how far the balance in this talk has shifted away from the predominance of teacher utterance and towards greater participation by pupils. Such a shift has proved perennially difficult in the classroom. As was the case in the classroom studied by John Gordon, a literary text constitutes the ground of that shared space between interlocutors where imagination is fired, ideas are presented and interpretations offered. Open acceptance of ideas, coupled with feedback which, crucially, is not evaluative, seem to be vital elements in the success of the distinctive practice examined. Far from being a distraction from the real work of teaching and learning, or a marginalisation of the teacher, or a license for students to act up, show off or tune out, this shared space of talk constitutes perhaps the most productive place in which independent thought can be developed, and understanding arrived at.

Chris Watkins's snapshot of the current state of oracy suggests that young people do indeed continue to spend too much time in class listening to the teacher. He offers ways in which the established patterns of classroom communication might be changed in order to enhance learning and develop what he terms 'learning-centred approaches'. He also proffers 10-year-old Georgia's alternative to the job description offered by Sylve. In Georgia's view, 'It's the teacher's job to let the learner be the centre of their world'.

Lorraine Kessler-Singh and Leena Helevaara Robertson remind us of the extensive academic work which has gone into researching many aspects of classroom talk. Despite this, and even when policy recommendations are supportive, oracy remains marginal. Kessler-Singh and Robertson list what they term 'the five fears' which inhibit widespread adoption of talk-based pedagogies. They draw attention to some of the good practice that exists, and call on teachers to clamour for its further development.

The categories of talk which have been of concern to these contributors – exploratory talk, shared discussion in class, talking to learn – fall outside the arena in which talk is undertaken more consciously as performance. To assess such talk in a summative way, even if it could be credibly done, would be to change its nature. Exploratory talk in its various forms is valuable intrinsically to

the talker and (one hopes) to any listener, and also to the teacher as a way to continue to know the student better. But in a results-driven assessment system, that which is not summatively assessed is likely to be overlooked. So, in relation to learning, this kind of talk's foundational importance can be concealed. The impoverished conception of learning established and imperiously validated by public exams, and the effect this has on young people, are glanced at by Kath Aspinwall through the lens of her imagination. She reminds us that, individually, we are all agents, and that it lies within our collective power to change our situation for the better.

Fresh from serving on the government's Commission for Assessment without Levels, Alison Peacock drew on her experience as head teacher at the Wroxham School to address issues of assessment when she gave the 2015 Brian Simon Memorial Lecture. We publish its text. At Wroxham, assessment and reporting aspire to the condition of a dialogue between pupil, parent/carer, and teacher. Conversation is not held in the lingua franca of attainment levels. In her lecture, Alison Peacock highlights the importance, when it comes to assessment thoughtfully conceived, of listening to pupils talk about their learning from the inside, and of enabling them to participate more meaningfully in the assessment process.

Mike Bassey recognises the significance, for learning, of talk in our lives from the moment of birth. His article criticises instrumentalist conceptions of education, and economically founded arguments for how best to narrow the attainment gap between identified cohorts of students. Instead he favours approaches that begin from what he calls 'the humanity of education'. In particular, he argues for expanding Sure Start services, richly resourcing early years provision, and freeing primary schools from current constraints, in order to lower the barriers facing children from impoverished homes as they enter the school system. In part his argument addresses what he is prepared to term 'cultural deprivation'.

The school system continues to be described either as the motor of social mobility or as the brake on it. Bernard Barker and Kate Hoskins detail five ways in which the concept of social mobility for any but a handful of individuals might be regarded as a mirage, and general embourgeoisement as unattainable. Capitalist relations of production structure our society and ensure that inequality is persistent and pervasive. Schools can neither overcome this nor compensate for its corrosive social effects. In the words of the authors, schools 'cannot create the preconditions for their own success'.

But perhaps it depends what is meant by success? The fashion for an increasingly corporate approach to the way schools present what they do exercises Stuart Norris. His article highlights how secondary schools are required to market themselves more and more in the style of private business, using advertisements, brochures and so-called impact events to compete for their student intake. Expectations raised in the minds of Year 6 pupils by such marketisation tools may not be fulfilled in the early weeks of Year 7, with potentially adverse consequences for motivation and engagement.

Marketisation and academy chains; Free Schools and Teach First; PISA and Progress 8 ... How much would the late Brian Simon recognise of today's educational landscape? Sue Cox asks herself this question as she rereads in detail *Breaking the Rules*, the book Simon wrote and published as the 1988 Education Reform Bill was passing through Parliament. The far-reaching and dangerous nature of the measures was recognised at the time. Simon's penetrating analysis helped cohere opposition. Sue Cox underscores the extent to which Simon exposed the implications of the Bill in relation, for example, to the drive towards school privatisation, long nurtured in parts of the Tory party, and to the reconfiguration of teaching as 'delivery'.

Douglas Barnes's research on talk in the classroom, and in particular the role of small-group talk, has been seminal. Patrick Yarker adds his twopenn'orth to the conversation about the place and worth of talk for learning by looking again, forty years on, at what Barnes wrote in *From Communication to Curriculum*.

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Patrick Yarker

Reference

Barnes, D., Britton, J. & Rosen, H. (1971) *Language, the Learner and the School*, revised edn. Harmondsworth: Penguin.