Toppling Teacher Domination of Primary Classroom Talk through Dialogic Literary Gatherings in England

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ABSTRACT Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs), first implemented by Ramon Flecha, have proved to be a 'successful educational action' (SEA) for inclusion, social cohesion and raising children's attainment in several European and Latin American countries. This article reports their implementation in England and their consistent and dramatic reversal of the hard-to-shift teacher–pupil talk ratio. Primary children read an agreed chapter of a suitable edition of a classic text (e.g. *The Odyssey*) at home, and select an idea from the text to share with the class in the DLG. They say why they have chosen it and other children comment, giving their reasons for agreeing or disagreeing. The teacher chairs the discussion, ensuring that all who wish to speak can do so, and without giving evaluative feedback. Consistent findings are that over 75% of the class join in the dialogue, contributing over 80% of the talk, often in extended utterances which reveal reasoning and speculation. DLGs are associated with gains in motivation and attainment in reading (reported elsewhere). They have the potential to close the class-based attainment gap.

Introduction

Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs) transform the long-established and often-lamented characteristics, of teacher-dominated classroom talk (Flanders, 1964) gripped by IRF (Initiation–Response–Feedback) question–answer recitals of factual recall. In this article, we shall report the implementation of DLGs in English primary schools as part of the Children's Personal Epistemologies (ChiPE) project (http://chipeproject.eu), led by García-Carrión in her European Community-funded Marie Curie postdoctoral fellowship. DLGs, or *Tertulias Literarias Dialógicas,* were first developed by Ramón Flecha (2000) with adult learners in 1980s' Barcelona. They are now increasingly being used as a

'successful educational action' (SEA) in classrooms in Spain, Latin America and Korea. They are associated with gains in achievement and motivation. Before going any further, we must emphasise that DLGs are one element of a holistic approach to learning in which children, teachers, family and neighbourhoods work towards becoming socially inclusive and cohesive 'Learning Communities' (*Comunidades de Aprendizaje*). They embody seven 'dialogic principles' defined and illustrated in Flecha (2000), beginning with the principle of Egalitarian Dialogue: 'A dialogue is egalitarian when it takes different contributions into consideration according to the validity of their reasoning, instead of according to the positions of power held by those who make the contributions' (Flecha, 2000, p. 2). This principle is likely to be seen as radical, if not totally impractical, in a normal primary classroom of 30 young children whose teacher, according to convention, must deter noise and movement. Nevertheless, it can be achieved. Before saying more about DLGs, we shall present a highly selective overview of research on classroom talk in making the case for them.

Background

This article focuses more on the quantity and distribution of talk than on the discourse itself, because, without a better balance of teacher–pupil talk, and a change in the nature of teacher talk, children are being denied the benefits of using talk to advance their social and cognitive development (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Our emphasis here, therefore, is on the findings of systematic observational research. Flanders' (1964) well-known observations that talk occupies two-thirds of classroom time, and that two-thirds of that is teacher talk is not so surprising. The 'ORACLE' 1970s' research, however, revealed that this was almost true even in so-called 'progressive' English primary classrooms (Galton et al, 1980). By the 1990s, despite awareness of Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory and the role of social interaction in cognitive development, the 'ORACLE 20 years on' project found that the proportion of teacher to pupil talk had worsened from 57 to 75% (Galton et al, 1999, p. 61). While there have been successful interventions designed to increase pupil talk and ensure wider pupil participation, such as group work (Baines et al, 2003), teacher domination and IRF patterns have remained (Hardman, 2008; Howe & Abedin, 2013). Chinn (2015), for example, referred with pride to 61% as a 'high level' of pupil participation in a recent study.

ChiPE's main aim has been to create a more inclusive 'epistemic climate' (Feucht, 2010) with more dialogic space for all children, including those who are passively and unwittingly excluded by having to bid for the teacher's attention. DLGs seem likely to create the space for children to draw on their funds of knowledge from home and community (Gonzalez et al, 2005; Mayall, 2010). Inspired by classic texts, they can contribute this knowledge while accessing high literary culture and linking it with their own lives, ideas and experiences. Our interest here, however, is on whether the DLG creates an interaction profile that could facilitate greater participation and inclusion.

Back to the ORACLE

ORACLE observations define questions stringently according to how they are answered, rather than whether the utterance needs a question mark. By the mid 1990s, teachers' questions and statements had both increased, but the ratio between them had barely changed at one question per 3.6 statements. 'Interactive teaching' in the National Literacy Strategy in 2000 improved this ratio to one question per 1.9 statements (35 to 65%), thus giving pupils more opportunities to talk (Hargreaves et al, 2003, pp. 107-108). Compared with ORACLE 20 years on, questions had doubled as a proportion of all teacher observations (29%), while statements had reduced to 54%. Nevertheless, pupil utterances overall remained short (1-3 words in 95% of observations). Alexander (2001) reported likewise that pupils' mean length of utterance (MLU) in England was two words (range 1-9) whereas teachers' MLU was 4.6 (range 1-40). Without the opportunity for extended utterances, children have less chance to 'think together' with others (Mercer, 2000), to use what Mercer (2013) calls the 'social brain'.

Dialogic Literary Gatherings

DLGs are one expression of Flecha's theory of dialogic learning, built on the 'premise that learning primarily depends on the interactions and dialogues that the students have, not only with teachers but also with the other students, their families and other members of the community' (Flecha, 2015, p. 71). Flecha builds on Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action, and especially Freire's (1970) theory of dialogic action, among others. Within these, the focal concepts are the essential role of social interaction, and the conviction that knowledge is not the exclusive property of the establishment, or education professionals, but that everyone is knowledgeable. DLGs were identified more recently as an SEA for the classroom in the European Union-funded INCLUD-ED project in 2006-11 (Flecha, 2015), which included 14 countries across Europe, but not, ultimately, England. An urgent concern in schools in Europe today is how to accommodate the growing numbers of migrant children. Flecha (2015, p. 42), points out that 'While such gatherings are beneficial for all children, those with migrant backgrounds or whose mother tongue differs from the language of instruction particularly benefit from them'.

What Happens in a DLG?

For about one hour a week, the teacher chairs and listens to his/her class discuss part of a classic work, such as *The Odyssey, 1001 Arabian Nights, Don Quixote* (in an age-appropriate edition) that they have read at home, alone or with their family. They read 1-2 chapters or so, as agreed by the class that every child will be able to read it, with help if necessary from family, friend or teacher. While reading, each child chooses an idea/sentence/paragraph that

they wish to share with the class. The first session is modelled by someone familiar with DLGs and the theory of dialogic learning. The children and teacher sit on chairs in a circle, or perhaps around a large table. The teacher introduces the DLG and reminds everyone that they are going to share their ideas, referring to a page in the book and explaining the reasons for choosing that idea. At the very first DLG, the teacher reminds the class of some ground rules (e.g. taking turns, commenting on each others' idea, listening to and respecting everyone's opinions, giving priority to those who do not usually speak). S/he asks who would like to share an idea, and notes its page number. The first child reads aloud their chosen text (a few words, a sentence or paragraph) and explains their choice. The teacher invites others to comment. Typically, plenty of hands are raised. As we shall see later, the children's discussion is chaired but not evaluated by the teacher. One topic will last eight minutes or more, before the next child on the list is asked to share their choice. Numerous children contribute to each discussion, and our data show that over time those who rarely speak begin to make contributions.

In the ChiPE project four English primary schools implemented DLGs. After a presentation and time for staff to decide whether to be involved, the teachers of participating classes, in consultation with Rocio, decided which classic book to read. A class set of an age-appropriate edition was provided, thanks to the European Community funding. Every DLG was audio- and video-recorded, and field notes taken. Interviews with small groups of children and teachers were carried out at the beginning and end of the ChiPE implementation period, typically spring and summer terms, 2014. The recordings were transcribed and analysed with the help of NVivo, to answer our original research questions which focus on the meaning of the dialogue. Here, however, we are concentrating on the quantities of pupil and teacher talk.

Using the ORACLE Teacher Record to code teacher utterances, we present a coded excerpt and a summary of results to illustrate and answer the following research questions:

- Is the proportion of pupil to teacher talk shifted towards more pupil talk?
- Do pupils have the opportunity for extended utterances?
- What proportion of the whole class makes contributions to the dialogue?
- Do pupils build on and discuss each other's ideas?
- While not using Alexander's list of indicators of dialogic teaching as 'a checklist to which teachers are required to conform' (2006, p. 41) we can still ask, does the DLG demonstrate some characteristics of dialogic teaching?
- Is there evidence of egalitarian dialogue as defined by Flecha?

We shall also consider briefly the topics included in the DLGs.

Process and Outcomes of DLG

A class of 10-year-old children were reading the Puffin Classic edition of *The Odyssey* (Homer, *ca* 750 BC/retold by Geraldine McCaughrean, 1993). This

was their first DLG on *The Odyssey*. It lasted 38 minutes and included chapters 1 and 2. In the first 17 minutes they discussed the right to commit violent acts, the war itself, the reason for it and the Trojan horse. This part was initiated by a child's question and was answered by other children combining their knowledge of the wars of Troy. The children noted the humour in Odysseus calling himself 'Nobody Atall'. There is evidence below of the children reasoning as they talk: for example, AO changes his mind; if ... then ... hypothesising (AO and CA); posing a question (SM); explicit statements of agreement (SM with FH); and in the process, building on each other's ideas (R is Rocío, the facilitator).

> FH: I like the part when Odysseus and I think it was 50 men made the Cyclops, the son of Poseidon, blind.
> R: Why did you like that?
> FH: Because I don't really think that the Cyclops has a right to eat the men after they have given a gift.
> …
> SM: I think it was mmm, I agree with you, FH, that he didn't have a right, but did Odysseus have a right to make them blind?
> …
> AO: I actually think that he doesn't have the right to make him blind, because ... ah well I will change, he does have the right to make them blind because if he wasn't blind then he would try and hurt people and if he is blind and he can't see anything, there is no way for him to hurt anybody.
> R: CA?
> CA: I think [inaudible] because there are two consequences for each one. If they didn't blind him he would have eaten all of them. So, if he did, Poseidon wouldn't be very pleased.

After 17 minutes they moved on to the topic of promises and friendships, inspired by Odysseus and his men's meeting with Polyphemus the one-eyed giant, in chapter 2. The section below included 44 utterances altogether, with 33 shown here.

Talk	LU	Teacher talk
1. AN: I like the way that Odysseus asked what it means. So, then the Cyclops replies, *'No, shilly, Can't eat me! Eachew!'* (p. 15) kind of, as in that's going to happen. Then that's when the promise is broken, so he's just replied.	46	
2. R: OK. What do you think about AN's idea? Any comments? SM?	11	Open question
3. SM: I agree with AN, it's kind of funny how there is slurred for words to give you the idea he's sleepy, and mmm ... also	24	
4. R: FH?	1	name

5. FH: When it says *"I lied," said Polyphemus, with a beaming smile, before falling backwards unconscious.'*	6	
6. R: Just a little bit below AN's idea, Odysseus says '*But you promised!*'	10	Task supervision
7. FH: Because he said '*Can't eat me! Eachew*l,' which is kind of like eat and chew at the end of it.	20	
8. Miss: We call that a 'pun', when it's a play on words.	11	Factual statement
9. R: Any other comments? What do you think about 'broken the promise', because he lied? What do you think about that? Any comments? CE?	23	Open question
10. CE: I think he promised just so he could get the present. Then, when he had the present, he lied. So he lied just to get the present, because he might have been a bit greedy.	36	
11. R: Greedy. OK, EE?	3	Feedback? name
12. EE: I think he thought that, if he promised he wouldn't eat them, then, if he had the present and put it somewhere where they couldn't get it, and then he could [?eat them?].	33	
13. R: FH?	1	name
14. FH: Also, if he had the present and didn't break his promise, how would the story end?	17	
15. R: I don't know.	3	??
16. FH: Would it be that he never got, in the chapter it says that he got a [inaudible], so he would get the [inaudible] and then he can get home safely.	30	
17. R: I see. Another question, if you make a promise and then you decide to break the promise or to lie, what do you think about that? Does it happen to any one of you? IN?	35	Open question
18. IN: If somebody breaks a promise to me and then I would never trust in them, because, if I have a secret and I tell them and then they just tell everybody, I can't really trust them anymore with things that I say, secret things.	45	
19. R: I agree with that.	4	Feedback? agreement
20. Miss: I have a question on that, can you ever rebuild that trust or is it lost forever?	18	Open question
21. R: FA? And then MA?	4	name
22. FA: I know it's a different question, I think it is bad to break a promise, to break the trust, I am not sure if you can rebuild it by apologising.	30	
23. R: By apologising.	2	Feedback?
24. FA: [inaudible] don't tell them too much about it and then can you trust them?	14	

25. R: OK. MA?	2	name
26. MA: I agree with IN (…) then you can't trust them anymore [inaudible].	12	
27. R: OK. SM?	2	name
28. SM: This is in answer to Miss's question – I don't actually think you can rebuild the trust up. I think it's like a set of cards, like every card you get, the trust is built up, but if you lose one that slot's going to be empty forever. You can still get more cards to build a different trust, but it's going to be lost.	65	
29. R: OK. BN?	2	name
30. BN: I agree with IN they can't keep it and they go around telling everyone. You feel a bit stupid inside that you told them	24	
38. R: I think it's tricky, this, because Odysseus lied to the Cyclops, but he wants to save his men, doesn't he, and bring the people back to where they came from, because they were really looking forward to coming back home. But their friends were trusting him, in a way, the people who were working with Odysseus believed the Cyclops and [so did] and his men. So, it was tricky to say the lie to the Cyclops [inaudible]. OK, last comment, IN?	81	Statement of idea Open question
39. IN: I think it's all right to lie in some situations, because if you want to protect your friend and someone's hurt him, then you could save him by telling a lie. Sometimes you can lie, but only in death situations.	40	
40. R: Any comments, agree/disagree? EN?	4	Open question

*R is Rocío García- Carrión, chairing the DLG with the teacher (Miss) present.
LU: length of utterance.

Key Features

1. The proportion of pupil to teacher talk is dramatically improved compared with Flanders' two-thirds rule, and the ORACLE studies. In this DLG as a whole, there was 85% pupil talk and this was typical of other DLGs in the ChiPE project. The proportions ranged from 75 to 97% pupil talk, with a mean of 85%.

2. Eleven of the 17 children's utterances are at least 20 words, ranging up to 65 words (28) with a mean of 35.5. (Turn 34 [not shown] by AO is 47 words.) Overall, 942 audible words were spoken. In 19 utterances, nine different children use 518 words while R and Miss say 203 and 220 respectively. Miss's six turns total 220 words, (including turn 37 [not shown] of 102 words) and

includes factual statement (8). R, as an experienced DLG facilitator, had 19 turns, rarely saying more than naming the next child to speak.

3. Twelve children contributed in this single excerpt (not all shown), and 19 of the 25 children contributed to the DLG overall. The mean participation rate for nine DLGs in this class was 78.5%.

4. The children listen to, and build on, one another's ideas, as shown in their explicit agreement with each other (e.g. 3, 26) and in the development of the matter of Polyphemus's broken promise (10, 12, 14). Other excerpts reveal explicit, polite disagreements.

5. Several of Alexander's (2006, p. 42) characteristics of dialogic teaching in a teacher–whole class setting are present. For example, pupils ask questions and offer explanations. Principal turns are managed as the facilitator records the names of those who wish to share their ideas in advance (children bid to speak but the facilitator ensures that quieter children can also contribute). Our analyses show that over time, the quiet, non-contributing children begin to contribute. Children who are not speaking are largely engaged and listening actively. However, to achieve Alexander's dialogic teaching requires the teacher/facilitator to ask questions designed 'to provoke thoughtful answers'. While the questions at 9, 17 and 20 come into this category, the success of the DLG may be linked to the loosening of the imperative to answer a teacher's questions, however thought-provoking, to allow freedom for children to present their own interpretations. The open acceptance of the children's ideas, and lack of evaluative feedback, go some way to answering our next research question, namely whether the DLG approaches Flecha's 'egalitarian dialogue'.

6. The shift from typical classroom discourse to egalitarian dialogue is also shown in the way that both R and Miss listen to the children, and offer a summing up of this subtopic (not all shown), but even here, R acknowledges some ambiguity, 'I think it's tricky..' (38), and earlier admits, 'I don't know' (15). (Hargreaves was sceptical that teachers would be able to take on this role, reduce the power differential and join the dialogue *with* the children, but has had to eat her words.)

We must also consider the substantive topics that the children discuss. The DLG above included discussion of promises, lying, friendship, rights and violence, war and its causes. Other DLGs in the ChiPE project have included love and fidelity, death, dying, funeral practices, coping with bereavement, anxiety and fear, racist and nationalistic behaviour, and more. One teacher dare not broach the subject of a pupil's loss of his mother, until the children did so themselves in a DLG. These challenging topics are inspired by an essential element of DLG: namely the reading of a classic text, one that the children would probably not read otherwise. One justification for this is to show that such classics belong to

us all, and are not the preserve of the aristocracy or the academy; they have stood the test of time, centuries if not millennia; and they address age-old dilemmas of life.

Concluding Comments

This article includes one section of one DLG. Numerous other excerpts, from schools in a variety of circumstances, could have been chosen. All of them confirm the research questions posed here, principally that the common pattern of teacher-dominated interaction gives way to pupil talk when the children have chance to read the same book, at home, and come to the DLG ready to discuss their choice of topic. One unforgettable DLG was the last about the Odyssey in the class quoted here. The teacher had to leave, and invited children to volunteer to chair the DLG. Six volunteered and explained why they would make a good Chair. The one selected performed the role with utter professionalism, showing considerable self-regulation in inviting other children to speak without imposing his own opinions. The quality of the discussion was outstanding. One topic, inspired by Odysseus's return to Ithaca, included society's differential attitudes to rich and poor, to the elderly, judging by appearance, and the effects of 'being educated' on social attitudes. It lasted 15 minutes; 16 of the 25 children contributed, including two contributions of 186 and 204 words. There were many explicit agreements and disagreements, including, for example:

> DC: Like you said, SM, everyone is equal in themselves. Of course people think differently ... It is those beggars out there dying, and I can see Sam smiling at me, thinking that theory is wrong, but it isn't. ... It's too late; they are actually dead. Whereas if it's rich people, they start coughing, they have a coughing fit, they lie down, they start dying, people think it's more important for them to live rather than the old people, but that doesn't matter. They're old people, they all have equal rights. Poor people don't have more rights than posh people; posh people don't have more rights than poor people. It's the same amount of rights for every person.

The regular supply teacher, who listened open-mouthed, could not believe her ears. Flecha (2015) and Flecha & Soler (2013) show how SEAs such as DLGs can bring about inclusion and social cohesion. One remedial response to the headline, 'The Glaring Gap in the English Education System is Social Class' (*Guardian*, 2015), on Becky Francis's appointment as adviser to the new government select committee on education, might be to look closely at 'successful educational actions' such as DLGs and use education to overcome social inequality.

Acknowledgements

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