A Second Look at Douglas Barnes's *From Communication to Curriculum*

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ABSTRACT This article revisits Douglas Barnes's book-length exploration of the implications for teachers of a constructivist epistemology, notably in relation to the importance of small-group talk in classrooms. Empirically based consideration of small-group exploratory pupil–pupil talk enabled Barnes to reveal the learning strategies such a context elicits, and to argue for its educational significance. Barnes also considers how a curriculum can be seen as a form of communication. He identifies the importance of pupil engagement if learning is to be effective, and explores some of the patterns of communication which enhance such engagement. Barnes's attention to pupils' production of knowledge through exploratory talk retains its power to correct the view that teaching is essentially about the delivery of predetermined lesson-content.

> It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
> dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free ...
> (from 'At the Fishhouses' by Elizabeth Bishop)

At the end of his book, published forty years ago but as necessary as ever, Douglas Barnes reminds readers of his fundamental thesis: 'that the learner should take more part in the formulation of knowledge' (1976, p. 191). It remains a bold claim, and one Barnes admits may seem nonsensical to some, and 'contrary to common sense' (p. 100). The arguments he lays out to support his claim take in ideas about students' writing, but centre on the role of shared talk in the classroom. The particular conception of knowledge Barnes upholds shapes his view of what it is to learn, and what a curriculum might be, and has profound implications for an understanding of what it is to teach.

For Barnes, '[t]he major means by which children in our schools formulate knowledge and relate it to their own purposes and view of the world are speech and writing' (p. 19). Spoken language allows speaker and listener to hear organised thought and reflect on it. Furthermore, language is 'a tool for making

meaning as well as for communicating existing meaning' (p. 100). Talk is crucial for the transforming or recoding of prior knowledge to produce new, more adequate or commensurate interpretations or understandings; that is, to produce the new known. Barnes draws on the work of Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner to argue that knowledge is best understood not as an ever-increasing hoard of known things so much as a series of progressively more adequate transformations of what is known. He writes, 'The idea of changing knowledge by re-coding it, by verbalizing or some other way, is so central to the argument of this book that I cannot overemphasize it' (p. 24), and elsewhere, when thinking about understanding, 'By formulating knowledge for oneself one gains access to the principles on which it is based' (p. 115). For Barnes, the curriculum is better conceived of not as a thing, but as a set of meaningful activities, among which communication in speech and writing holds pride of place.

Barnes's book expands resonantly on these tenets. In chapter 5 he considers how a teacher's views of what knowledge is informs how the teacher understands learning, and what the teacher conceives worthwhile communication in the classroom to be. This chapter dissects the transmission model of teaching, or teaching-as-delivery, and indicts it for what it inevitably excludes. Barnes argues that if knowledge, understood here as both content and also criteria for performance, is regarded by the teacher as residing primarily in established public disciplines, it is more likely that she will establish classroom communication in ways which privilege transmission, memory and evaluative assessment. This in turn will affect how students respond. Such a pattern of communication will 'compel pupils to adopt a mainly presentational performance in which speech and writing perform "final draft" functions' (p. 146). Barnes holds that in this classroom the possibilities are significantly constrained for bringing curricular content into meaningful relationship with what it is students already know and with their lived purposes and intentions.

Language Strategies, Learning Strategies

One way forward is for teachers to make more extensive use of what Barnes calls 'learning by talking' (p. 25). Students should have more opportunity to talk with each other in small groups about texts, tasks and problems given to them by the teacher. In his contribution to an earlier book (Barnes et al, 1969), Barnes illustrated his endorsement of the particular value of small-group exploratory talk by presenting careful analyses of a series of transcripts. He does so again here, examining the ways individual students talk together and interpreting the thinking which might lie behind significant utterances. He is especially concerned to shed light on the extent to which learning may be said to have come about. Can time spent talking with peers away from the teacher's direct presence be educationally fruitful?

Barnes identifies examples of how small-group exploratory talk enables individuals to 'monitor [their] own thought, and re-shape it' (p. 28), and how

'talk is here a means for controlling thinking' (p. 28). The hesitations, uncertainties, rephrasings and false starts which would be impermissible in 'final draft' talking, in front of the whole class for example, here prove to be valuable way-stations as students '[are] groping towards a meaning' (p. 28). The absence of the teacher 'removes ... the usual source of authority ... Thus ... the children not only formulate hypotheses, but are compelled to evaluate them for themselves. ... The more a learner controls his own language strategies, and the more he is enabled to think aloud, the more he can take responsibility for formulating explanatory hypotheses and evaluating them' (p. 29).

Extracts from the transcripts reveal a variety of what Barnes claims to be 'potentially valuable learning strategies' (p. 42). He notes how more successful small groups resist seeking the finality of immediate consensus. They adopt an open approach, holding back from the conclusive expression of a settled view. This licenses questioning and keeps a wide range of possible responses in play. Barnes notes that the absence of the teacher from the discussion can allow questions to be raised which particularly matter to the students, and which might not have been raised in the teacher's presence. The teacher's absence may also offer a broader licence for what can count as an acceptable answer. Barnes thinks that in successful groups students talk their way into the task they have been given, and stay engaged because this process is their own. Students raise hypotheses, think about them, and remain in a state of undecidedness which is helpful rather than unsettling. In doing so, students perhaps approach that version of conversation commended by the philosopher Gadamer, in which:

> [t]o conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject-matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented. It requires that one does not try to argue the other person down but that one really considers the weight of the other's opinion. Hence it is an art of testing. But the art of testing is the art of questioning. For we have seen that to question means to lay open, to place in the open. As against the fixity of opinions, questioning makes the object and all of its possibilities fluid. A person skilled in the 'art' of questioning is a person who can prevent questions from being suppressed by the dominant opinion. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 367)

Transcription evidence that talk seems more conducive to learning in some small groups than in others leads Barnes to begin to consider why this might be. The socio-emotional dimension of learning starts to become more visible. Students who feel at ease with each other seem to talk in ways which are more educationally fruitful: 'Equal status and mutual trust encourages thinking aloud: one can risk inexplicitness, confusion and dead-ends because one trusts in the tolerance of others. The others are seen as collaborators in a joint enterprise rather than as competitors for the teacher's approval' (p. 109). It's an argument for letting friends work together.

The Enacted Curriculum

For Barnes, 'the central problem of teaching is how to put adult knowledge at children's disposal so that it does not become a strait-jacket' (p. 81). In the classrooms of the 1970s, Barnes finds this problem addressed through patterns of communication which allot to students very limited and limiting roles, certainly so far as talk is concerned. The common use of whole-class question-and-answer sessions, or of encounters modelled on the Initiation-Response-Feedback/Evaluate pattern, tend, among other things, to privilege 'right answers', and to require fleetingly brief responses from students which in turn can foster their disengagement.

In a comment which rebukes the idea that the teacher can be a mere conduit for curriculum content generated elsewhere, or that teaching is reducible to a technical or instrumental practice, or to a script, Barnes notes that '[i]t would be a mistake to think that what a teacher teaches is quite separate from how he teaches' (p. 139). As soon as teacher meets taught, the teacher *is* the curriculum, and embodies the possibility and extent to which the curriculum will or won't become a straitjacket. For Barnes, the content of a curriculum is not to be unwoven from the ways in which it comes to be communicated and 'enacted' (p. 14). He explains:

> By 'enact' I mean [to] come together in a meaningful
> communication: talk, write, read books, collaborate, become angry
> with one another, learn what to say and do, and how to interpret
> what others say and do. A curriculum as soon as it becomes more
> than its intentions is embodied in the communicative life of an
> institution ... In this sense curriculum is a form of communication.
> (p. 14)

Across much of the time since Barnes's book appeared policy makers, if not teachers, seem to have wanted to solve the central problem Barnes identifies by attempting to enhance delivery or transmission. Barnes comes at it from the other end. What is needed, he claims in a striking phrase, is to enable 'an act of sympathy' (p. 87):

> If the pupils feel no sympathetic interest in the topic and therefore
> reject it, there can be no effective learning of the kind being
> discussed. ... Only by an act of sympathy can [a group of pupils]
> bring [curriculum content] and their own lives into relation with one
> another, in order to gain insight. (p. 87)

A teacher cannot substitute for that act of sympathy, still less command it. It remains in the gift of the student, and as such is an element in the student's continuing power to determine whether or not to learn as desired. Understanding this, a teacher will use her power so to shape the classroom environment that this act of sympathy will be made more readily possible, and over time may become the norm. Partly, this will be done through the patterns of communication established. Those patterns depend on how the student is

'seen' by the teacher and the school, and on the ways knowledge is conceived of. Are students recognised as having things worth saying? How is the language they bring to the classroom valued? How are their ideas received and made use of? How is their prior knowledge shown to be important? It might be claimed that, to best elicit the necessary 'act of sympathy' without which effective learning cannot take place, students must be seen more as people, and less as students.

Notoriously Unproductive

Barnes understands that, in school, knowledge will have to be made public. Students need to communicate what they know in ways that are available to others who hold different intellectual positions or outlooks. Here again work in small groups can be supportive, since it allows the students, as Barnes puts it (p. 118), to travel before they arrive. The travelling, intellectual and emotional, which small-group talk makes possible enables students to join in the pubic conversation (big group talk, perhaps) from a position which is more secure in its own understanding, and in which the student is more invested. There is less risk that, in making knowledge public, a student will only be repeating what the teacher said first, without as yet having made such content his or her own.

There is a place for what Barnes calls 'final draft' talking, but too often a teacher can require such talk prematurely, or receive it purely for purposes of evaluation. Barnes claims that 'We cannot expect exploratory talk or writing when pupils perceive their teacher to be more concerned to assess than to reply' (p. 112). He offers several reasons for the perceived reluctance of teachers at the time to let small-group exploratory talk feature more often in the classroom. Prevailing attitudes about what counts as acceptable classroom behaviour – on the part of the teacher, as well as the students – may be one factor here. Discounting students' existing knowledge and experience may be another. Insisting too early that correct technical terminology be used in discussion may be a third. Barnes advises teachers to be less concerned with controlling 'the moment by moment progress of the content of the lesson' (p. 133). Instead, they are to focus more on the 'mode of speech' (p. 133). That is, Barnes suggests a teacher's educational concern is better directed more at the ways in which students talk over time, and less at what they utter at any particular moment. This counter-intuitive suggestion retains its happy power to challenge 'common sense' at root.

Barnes's belief that 'there is a relationship between knowledge and patterns of communication' (p. 157) leads him to examine the attainment gap between working-class students and middle-class ones. Barnes rejects what he calls 'deficiency explanations [which are] everyday currency' in 1976, as they are still (p. 158). He does so in part because such tropes recognise students only as (inadequate) receivers of information. Instead he favours looking at how the two-way process of communication currently established within the school may be failing the student. This leads him to ask about the sense of agency certain

students feel they have. It also leads him to recognise the power of wider social forces to affect what happens in classrooms:

> We cannot understand how language is used for learning without considering the normative order of the school. This includes both how the school is organised, and the values which are implicitly celebrated in the day-to-day interaction of teachers and pupils. Communication is the common term which links the social order of the school with the curriculum ... In one sense the social order *is* the pattern of communication. (p. 183; original emphasis)

At the time, attacks on child-centred education or so-called progressive approaches continued to be staged full-bloodedly by the political Right as part of their assault on comprehensive schooling; for example, through the widely disseminated Black Papers, the last of which was published in 1977. Teachers were exhorted to reassert a supposedly abandoned authority, the more traditionally the better. In a dissenting note to the Bullock Report of 1975, head teacher Stuart Froome, a Black Paper contributor, laid down just how educationally worthless the talk of children in class was taken to be: 'It is doubtful if children's talk in school does much to improve their knowledge, for free discussion as a learning procedure at any age is notoriously unproductive' (Froome, 1975, p. 558).

Who Speaks, and Who Is Heard

It dies hard, the belief that if schoolchildren are talking they will not be learning. The current Schools Minister apparently shares the view that to raise the profile of spoken language in classrooms is to encourage 'idle chatter' (Alexander, 2012, p. 375). Barnes's analysis of transcripts derived from recordings of small groups of students in discussion helps to counter such prejudice, and the uninsistent and restrained tone of his book furthers his cause. But oracy continues to be regarded with suspicion, if not disdain, by the powerful. It is easy enough to see why. Who speaks, and who is heard, are politically charged matters. Prevailing power structures are put in question through talk, even at school level. The teacher, too, is implicated:

> I do indeed want to ask teachers whether in their teaching they are doing what they believe they should be doing ... [R]eal change ... depends on teachers being willing to monitor what goes on in their classrooms, in order to match what they see against their own best values. A culture which reduces pupils to passive receivers of knowledge is likely to reduce teachers to passive receivers of curricula, and to deny them the time and resources that would enable them to take active responsibility. (pp. 184, 188)

Barnes's use of the word 'monitor' interests me here. Initially it might seem a surprising choice, redolent as it is of control and surveillance. But meaning is

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redeemed by the second part of the sentence. Teachers are to monitor their classrooms not to ensure order and compliance, but to weigh what is happening in the scale of 'their own best values'. And if monitoring in this sense reveals that what goes on in classrooms runs counter to what teachers believe they should be doing, they must be true to themselves as responsible agents. They must act to improve things.

Today's shapers of education policy proceed as if no political or ethical problem attends either what is determined to be curriculum knowledge or who shall determine it. They seem to think such knowledge is of a separate and more important order than the knowledge students already hold, and that teaching-as-delivery is the way to inculcate it. They shut their ears to the case Barnes made. True to the spirit of dialogue and its power to influence and transform, which is to say to teach, he continues, with others, to make it.

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