Talking it up

Patrick Yarker

Classroom Talk in Practice: Teachers' experiences of oracy in action

Rupert Knight, Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2022.
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Teachers possess professional judgement and must exercise it. Such judgement is a hallmark of teaching expertise. It is grounded in values, commitments, ethics and politics as well as in the demonstration of particular technical skills. So says Rupert Knight at the outset of his book, one he hopes will inform and further refine the professional judgement of the practitioners it is primarily written for. He wants them to weigh up what he says, and trusts them to do so. Implicitly he is reminding an entire profession that its practitioners have the informed knowledge and insight necessary for the further development of their own practice and are the people best placed to take good teaching forward. He is right.

Across nine chapters Knight presents and reflects upon examples of imaginative teaching which help young people in schools talk their way further into knowledge, understanding and critical awareness. Since 'official' pedagogy can barely countenance sustained classroom talk by anyone other than a teacher, Knight begins by visiting and endorsing the three most common arguments put forward in support of pupils and students talking more in class. These are: the importance of developing 'communicative competence' in order to be employed; the value of talk for learning (and so for enhancing attainment); and the right of young people to have a say in their own education. He goes on to consider how different kinds of classroom talk can be engendered, supported and critically appraised. He devotes a chapter each to whole-class talking with the teacher, to student-led small group talk (given its importance for the co-construction of understanding, this is fittingly the central chapter) and to the concept of 'dialogic classrooms'. A shorter chapter looks at how digital technology can offer ways to stimulate talk and open new spaces for it. The final two chapters put forward ideas and examples in support of enabling 'high quality' talk across the school.

Each chapter begins with a boxed preview of what it will contain, and concludes with a handful of questions for reflection together with information about further resources related to the issues discussed. Numbered boxes within each chapter summarise theoretical ideas or perspectives – Knight has read very widely. Unnumbered ones offer vignettes of lessons from the variety of schools whose work Knight draws on which illustrate the central topic of the chapter. Knight points out that he is not tapping a representative sample of schools, nor looking to generate 'findings'. His short clear descriptions of particular kinds of talk activity serve to illustrate important ideas or to

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exemplify possible approaches teachers might opt for or adapt in their own classrooms. Knight argues that by working from what practitioners actually do, by 'juxtaposing contrasting examples from different contexts' (p2) and by considering the meaning of practice, new insights may be gained. Every now and again a box will carry an extract from an interview with a teacher or student. These offer a rationale for a particular approach or highlight an important idea. Cumulatively they testify to the principled practice by which teachers bring about high-quality classroom talk in all its manifestations.

As a reader I find the frequent use of textboxes irritating, since different sorts of boxed material must be read in different ways: one kind of attention is required for theoretical summaries, another for lesson descriptions, yet another for following the argument of the 'main text'. But such a disposition of the text may help make it easier for practitioners to find the particular information they want.

Knight emphasises the metacognitive benefits of talk. He quotes teachers pointing out to students how they are 'talking well'. This dimension of classroom talk seems especially powerful in helping young people learn. It acknowledges and names what students are already doing to good effect so they can do more of it, and it helps to cultivate that self-reflexive aspect of thinking and utterance, the mind assessing its own production even as it produces, which is the essence of criticality and self-development as a learner.

But there's a risk here, too. What constitutes 'good talk' can all too quickly be broken down into its supposed discrete component parts, the identifying of which becomes an end in itself. This can undermine just what it is that may have made the talk good: its protean spontaneity, its trustfulness and honesty, for example, and its improvisatory or adventurous momentum. Knight is alive to this danger, notably when he presents and discusses the 'oracy framework' developed by Cambridge University and Voice 21 (p28). The framework is an attempt to offer a way for the fluidity of talk to be crystalised so that important individual elements or characteristics can be considered and reflected on. The likelihood that such a framework can be used to reify its object and reinforce instrumentalist, transactional and tick-box focused approaches to the production of high-quality talk in class is acknowledged. But this danger is outweighed, in Knight's view, by the usefulness of the framework in helping establish high-quality classroom talk as something to be taken seriously in discussion in schools and among those who set the parameters for pedagogy. Perhaps Knight is also more accommodating than I might be to those who do not prize talk for learning, or who are reluctant to move beyond varieties of teacher-dominated classroom talk. He makes helpful suggestions for alternatives to the 'feedback' third move in the ubiquitous I-R-F (initiation-response-feedback) process, opening new ways in which practitioners can become comfortable with more co-agentic and dialogic forms of classroom talk.

Knight respects the importance of co-agency for the successful generation of 'high quality talk'. To be sustained, a dialogue requires its participants share responsibility for

making it work, albeit not necessarily equal responsibility. Dialogue is collaboration. It asks a great deal of a teacher to establish, manage, sustain and educationally appraise high-quality dialogue, not least within student-led small groups. The skill with which teachers bring into being such dialogue and sustain it, including the way they productively manage disagreement, is of a high order and hard won. Knight's book continually shows this. Official pedagogy, deeply reactionary because in thrall to high-stakes testing and mired in a theory of learning obsessed with memorisation and the 'cognitive load', requires that the teacher be the sole source and transmitter of acceptable knowledge in class. In such circumstances how can the expert practice Knight presents be properly recognised, let alone fostered and widely disseminated? And yet it is by dint of such work that young people are enabled to think further, more precisely and incisively, and so to nurture in themselves and for themselves the kind of thinking that is the fruit of education.

Knight says very little about the issue of 'correctness' in talk, or the use of Standard English in classrooms, though he does note that the 'policing' of language can be seen 'as part of a wider agenda of control and standardisation rather than as a legitimate goal of learning' (p46). He recognises that fraught questions of self-worth, judgement and potential silencing, can particularly infuse talk in classrooms. He acknowledges the silent student and gently raises the possibility that it might be OK for those who don't talk much (if at all) in the classroom to seem to be un-included: 'Some studies … suggest that silent students may learn just as much as their more vocal peers – though this depends on a culture of active engaged listening, which needs to be cultivated' (p59).

In keeping with this welcome hint that a wider, rather than narrower, repertoire of ways one can present in the classroom should be admissible, perhaps something more could have been said about the need for a teacher to begin with an acceptance of the accent and language each child brings to the classroom, however inappropriate it may initially appear? Such acceptance lays the ground for establishing with the child (or rather, between child and teacher) the conditions that will make it possible for the child to widen her linguistic repertoire and refine her ability to adopt vocabulary, register and tone more fitting for the context of the utterance.

Knight's book is a thoughtful, concentrated and optimistic addition to the stock of material that takes talk for learning seriously. It illuminates many complex issues, faces up to the demands made on teachers who wish to establish and maintain conditions which better make for learning through talk, and celebrates what can result. Teachers looking judiciously to invite more talk in their classrooms and across their schools, and hence to enable more varied learning, will find Knight's book invaluable. It encourages a proper degree of trust in young people to be talkative learners in the best sense.

Patrick Yarker is the Editor of *FORUM*

patyarker@aol.com