

Learning Lessons



The Research Publication of King Edward VI Grammar School, Chelmsford www.kegs.org.uk

Still talking ... Dialogic Teaching (Year three):



reflective action

teacher-student *dialogues* in KEGS English

classrooms, as AS/A2 coursework assignments were planned, with a view to assessing the impact upon writing.

A further English Department 'Leading Edge' project - by David Greenwood and Emma Barton -

1. Conclusion of *Learning lessons*, June, 2009 Vol., 2 issue 3

We concluded our June, 2009 *Learning Lessons* issue, as follows:

"Our exploration of the benefits of extended dialogue has been exciting. An opening up of classroom theory and practice to reveal a potentially new and powerful teaching and learning strategy can be a challenge, regardless of age or experience, but the very positive response from those involved has encouraged progression, to build upon the learning of the student as well as that of the teacher. Dialogic Teaching encourages sharing of ideas, respecting differences, moving forward collectively and therefore it should be acknowledged here that teacher-teacher dialogue is just as vital as teacher-student dialogue. As practitioners, engagement will continue during critical, reflective and active discussion, to explore both positive and negative experience

'A long answer is not enough: it's what happens to the answer that makes it worth uttering' (M. Bakhtin)



Some of the Year 12 students who formed part of the lesson filmed for use by the Cambridge Faculty.

in order for our own learning to be furthered"

2. Ms. Barton's M.Ed Research conclusions: (Year 8 Project).

The Literature Review of Emma's MEd opened with an intention to revive Grave's concept of conferencing alongside genre writing – two different approaches that on first approach, do not sit comfortably together. It is

1. Conclusion of June, 2009 Vol., 3 issue 1
2. Ms. Barton's M.Ed Research conclusions: (Year 8 Project)
3. Sixth-Form uses of *reflective action dialogues* by English staff
4. Focus-group responses
5. Lessons and interviews filmed by Cambridge Education Faculty for *CamTalk*

"Developing the capacity to pursue new and interesting ideas with fellow educational practitioners to have a real impact on the lives and life chances of young people"



Volume 2 issue 13 March 2011

Authors: D Greenwood and E Barton
Editor: T Carter

proposed that dialogue is able to bring specific elements of these two approaches together using active reflection through a critical partnership of teacher and student. Following considerable discussion of the findings, a provisional argument is made that engaging in dialogue at the planning stage impacts positively upon students' writing.

The first research question addressed in the study, 'What are students' views on two specific types of writing in English lessons?', provoked a variety of responses on creative and analytical writing.

Overall, analytical writing is deemed to be more difficult than creative writing, although for both, the difficulty of transferring oral ideas into writing was acknowledged. The perception of freedom in creative writing was an interesting, and surprising, point to emerge as the technical skills for this writing were felt to be limited, with success being due to natural ability. Despite acknowledging the difficulties of analytical writing, a surprisingly low number of students use planning to help them. There is perhaps a connection revealed here between planning and ease of writing that could be explored in future research.

The second research question asked 'What are students' views on the use of dialogue when planning writing?'. Responses were mixed in terms of to what extent dialogue is used, but positive overall on using dialogue when planning. It is suggested that dialogue helps students' understanding, and also helps to transfer this understanding into writing, particularly important during planning. The importance of collaboration is recognised as engagement enables alternative interpretations, offering an opening up of multiple views during planning when students can take more risks. Cumulative dialogue is acknowledged to help build upon existing ideas and extend learning before writing.

Responses to the third research question, 'What student and teacher experiences emerge from engaging in dialogue?' were positive. It is argued that engagement in

...engaging in dialogue at the planning stage impacts positively upon students' writing.

dialogue promotes student learning through independent thought and collaboration, and involvement in a dialogic partnership can remove 'authoritative discourse' (Bakhtin). The importance of questioning is emphasised, particularly the use of 'authentic questions' (Alexander, 2008; p.15) as they encourage justification of ideas. The lack of a predetermined fixed answer, along with increased thinking time, offers meaning to emerge through difference, resulting in freedom of expression, risk taking, and a sense of emancipation through self-reflection.

The fourth research question, 'What is the place of dialogue in planning for writing?', offered significant responses in terms of achieving a possible solution to the problem of transferring dialogue into writing. The focus group felt that dialogue helps considerably at the planning stage as it encourages active reflection upon ideas. The open questions that take place challenge thinking and prompt justifications as students explore and reflect upon initial intentions. Dialogue works particularly well during planning because it offers a structure for writing through cumulative

and exploratory dialogue, promoting logical presentation of ideas. Grave's argument to avoid the mechanics of writing is deemed unhelpful in this current practice and educational culture that demands skills of composition and technique. Dialogue should embrace creativity but also recognise the importance of actively reflecting upon the mechanics to encourage freedom of student voice in writing.

3. Sixth-Form uses of *reflective action* teacher-student dialogues by English staff

Staff were first of all encouraged to read excerpts from Ms. Barton's M.Ed. thesis, the 'Literature Review' and 'Findings and Discussion' sections, at least. It was agreed that an initial questionnaire be used with one Sixth-Form class per member of staff—a total of 6 classes, across Years 12 and 13. The initial questionnaire asked the following key questions, amongst others—some of the most typical responses are summarised below, in each case:

1. **On a scale of 1– 10, with 1 being the most easy and 10 being the most difficult, how would you rate analytical writing (eg: using quotations to analyse character/theme).**

Most students recorded responses of 4 or 3—with only a few in 5 to 7 or in 2 to 1.

2. **The things I like about analytical writing are:**

The more regular responses included: "... familiar to me"; "allows me to look deeper into texts"; "...opportunity to explore different interpretations".

5. **I find this kind of writing difficult because:**

The more regular responses included: "it is hard to structure an argument."; "challenging to highlight the very best points"; "...hard to keep points relevant to the question."

7. **What are the most effective ways for you to plan your analytical writing?**

The majority said bullet points; a minority 'mind-maps'

After coursework plans were made by students, staff were asked to attempt 4 or 5 extended dialogues with selected individuals, on their coursework plans, as parts of lessons devoted to coursework planning, with the use of appropriately open, cumulative questioning, as used in the previous phase of this research and project—but with the emphasis now on planning. Staff were asked to record these *reflective action dialogues* using dictaphones. Over the course of time, some excerpts from recorded dialogues were played at a number of Department Meetings—and an external research assistant transcribed a selection for further analysis. The results were fascinating— and these

The lack of a predetermined fixed answer, along with increased thinking time, offers meaning to emerge through difference, resulting in freedom of expression, risk taking, and a sense of emancipation through self-reflection.

illustrated and confirmed the need to take seriously Robin Alexander's repeated warnings to the effect that "**cumulation**" is "**the toughest of the five elements of dialogic teaching cumulation also tests the teacher's ability to receive and review what has been said and to judge what to offer by way of an individually tailored response which will take learners' thinking forward, all in the space of of a few seconds Who dared to suggest that teaching is easy?**" ("Culture, Dialogue and Learning; ..." , 2005).

From the shared listening done as a staff group and from the reading of the transcripts, it became clear that prompt or leading questions (as well as brief, confirmatory responses) do, at times, still occur a little too frequently—but, it is also obvious that our skills with truly 'cumulative' open questioning are developing effectively. One example of a teacher attempting and partly succeeding at building on a student's answer and / or asking open questions is given below, in an extract from a verbatim transcript of a classroom dialogue, about an A2 coursework plan:

Teacher:

So would there be a particular critical school or view that you would start with and would you have reasons for starting with that

Student:

I'd like to straight set up Marxism against erm an aesthetic sort of point of view and get straight in there with Verlaine as I think that will be nice seeing as he was main player in aesthetic movement

Cumulative dialogue is acknowledged to help build upon existing ideas and extend learning before writing.

Teacher:

Any other issues with er maybe holes in your plan or maybe strengths of your plan so far

Student:

I think there's a few holes erm strength of my plan is I think I've er
I really like my question erm and I I really sort of appreciate the poetry of Blake and Frost I did look at Wordsworth I

don't have to bring him in now I can erm focus on where I'm going here

Teacher:

Oh why no Wordsworth would you not consider bringing him in ...
briefly as

4. Focus-group responses

After the completion of the classroom dialogues, two representative student "focus groups" were created, with a view to establishing how helpful (or otherwise) their experiences in the extended dialogues had been, as the students went on to plan and then write their coursework assignments. Two lengthy sessions were recorded—one of 15 minutes and one of close to 20 minutes—with 4-5 students in each. **The transcript of one of these can be read in a file, accompanying this issue, on the school's website.**

There were many positive responses in the recording made of the second group, some of which are extracted here (and overleaf):

Student 1

I found it a lot better—I wasn't that nervous about it but I thought it was really good because I knew I'd repeated myself on quite a lot of paragraphs

Teacher A

Ok

Student 1

So that meant that I could cut bits out which I know that erm because I didn't realise when I was actually planning how much I'd repeated myself until you mentioned it.

I thought I got a lot from both what X and Y said, even though it was only two people in your questioning . I think that helped because again it indirectly questioned what I was doing and the fact that we were doing the same question helped me to evaluate instead of analyse .

Student 4

But again I think it made me focus more on the question what paragraphs I didn't need what I could you know intertwine with each other to make more sense but in also without you directly telling me what was wrong with mine it also made me question what I needed I felt that you know questioning X and Y it made me add things like the order to this other question

students and staff carried themselves off with flair and expertise, as the filming was done — the classes have subsequently enjoyed seeing clips of themselves!

5. Lessons and interviews filmed by Cambridge Education Faculty for the *CamTalk* course for Teachers.

In July, 2010, as the Department project came to an end, Sue Brindley, from the Cambridge Faculty of Education, arrived with a film crew, to record a 'dialogic' lesson run by Dr. Greenwood, (Year 12) and one led by Ms. Barton, (Year 8). The purpose was to film exemplar lessons and interview the staff involved—so that the recordings could be used as part of a new Cambridge Faculty course for teachers, to be known as *CamTalk*—sponsored by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation. The KEGS recordings will be used alongside some others, selected from other CamStar schools (CamStar investigates the relationship between professional knowledge, professional identity and

practitioner research). Despite very high Summer temperatures—in excess of 25 degrees—students and staff carried themselves off with flair and expertise, as the filming was done — the classes have subsequently enjoyed seeing clips of themselves!

As of February, 2011, at time of writing, it is interesting to know



Sue Brindley, from the Cambridge Faculty, observes a filmed lesson at KEGS.

that the KEGS contributions are to figure particularly in the assessment module of the Faculty course - and that this is an area which *CamTalk* are particularly excited about developing. This is because the uses of the dialogic in assessment is said to be problematic, because (if the pun is excused) it receives lip service in some quarters - and this is due, it is thought, to the operation of a somewhat limited understanding of dialogue. *Camtalk* are expecting the KEGS contributions here to be particularly powerful in shaping teacher thinking and learning.



Dr. Greenwood is interviewed for *CamTalk*. The film is available to view in the MPEG4-Movie file accompanying this article.

“Thank you again so much for all your support with this course - it's very exciting to see teachers now engaging with materials and we are looking forward to the research and - we hope - lots of positive outcomes! “
***CamTalk* thank KEGS English, February, 2011**

References

- Alexander, R., “Culture, Dialogue and Learning: Notes on an emerging Pedagogy”, (I.A.C.E.P. Conference, Univ. of Durham, 12th July, 2005).
- Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking Classroom Talk* (Dialogos UK Ltd., 2008: 4th edition)
- Hodgen, J. and Webb, M., “Questioning and dialogue”, in, Swaffield, S., ed., *Unlocking Assessment: understanding for reflection and application*, (D.Fulton, 2008), 73-89.
- Mercer, N. and Dawes, L., ‘Making the most of Classroom Talk: dialogue in the classroom’, *EnglishDramaMedia* (N.A.T.E.), March, 2009, Issue 16, 19-25.