

# Question time

Verbal questioning has long been a fundamental part of teaching. But does it really promote the dialogue that develops understanding? Caroline Roberts investigates

Robin Alexander, champion of “dialogic pedagogy”, believes there is still some way to go before talk achieves the prominence in the curriculum it deserves. Dialogic teaching “harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend students’ thinking and advance their learning and understanding,” says Alexander, Fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge, Professor of Education Emeritus at the University of Warwick, and Director of the Cambridge Primary Review. In a nutshell, it involves sustained discussion and dialogue between teacher and pupil that is very different to the normal question and answer routine.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TALK

Most of us know from experience that having to articulate an idea forces you to analyse it, enhancing your understanding. Neuroscience also tells us that talk is essential to the building of neural connections in the brain and, therefore, develops the capacity for learning. This is particularly true in the early and pre-adolescent years. As Alexander says in his book, *Towards Dialogic Teaching - Rethinking Classroom Talk* (Alexander 2008), “the extent and manner of children’s cognitive development depends to a considerable degree on the forms and contexts of language they have encountered and used”.

Alexander has carried out extensive research into teaching methods in other countries and notes the high value placed on oracy in some cultures. He gives the examples of France and Russia, where lessons are likely to contain a greater oral component, and may even consist entirely of talk. In such contexts there is likely to be much more extended discussion and exploration of ideas, and children are encouraged to speak audibly, clearly and at length.



In England, although question and answer is an important part of classroom practice, many studies have shown that the “default mode” of interaction is what American researchers call “recitation”. Questions are designed to check recall of knowledge, or provide pupils with clues to the “right” answer, and feedback is minimal. Although this has its place, it doesn’t produce sustained pupil talk – a 2004 review of interactive whole class teaching in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies found that most pupils’ answers lasted an average of five seconds and consisted of three words or fewer for 70 per cent of the time (Smith et al 2004). This is hardly likely to take their understanding further or turn out the confident communicators that society demands.

## SO WHAT DOES DIALOGIC TEACHING LOOK LIKE?

Alexander points out that “dialogic teaching is more a professional outlook or state of mind than a specific method”. He identifies five main principles, the first three of which are concerned with creating the teaching environment, attitudes, and relationships

that make dialogue possible. “Collectivity” involves teachers and pupils working together on learning tasks as a class or group. “Reciprocity” means listening to each other, sharing ideas and considering alternative views, and “support” refers to a culture where pupils help each other without being afraid of giving the “wrong” answer. These lay the foundation for “cumulation” – teachers and pupils building on their own and others’ ideas and, crucially, linking them into coherent lines of thinking through extended discussion. “Purposefulness” requires that dialogue is planned with specific learning goals in mind and questions used as scaffolding.

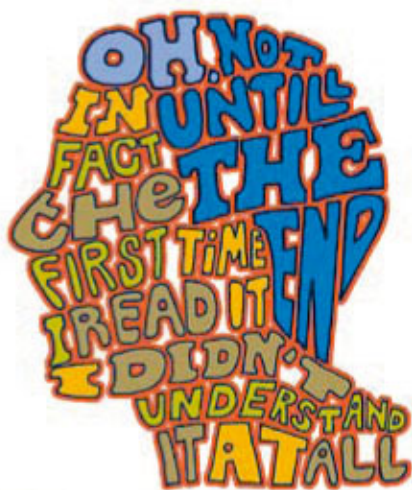
A key difference in practice is that, rather than the teacher flitting from one pupil to another in an effort to involve as many as possible – something that often results in a fragmented discussion – the emphasis is on exploring ideas through a sustained dialogue with an individual pupil who then becomes the representative of the class.

It also requires a different type of questioning, says Wendy Willmer, Head of Marks Gate Infant School, in Chadwell Heath, where dialogic teaching is now embedded. “Instead of saying, ‘why do you think that happened?’ you say, ‘I wonder why that happened’. It’s the same question, but it’s much more you joining them in thinking about it. That makes a huge difference to the response. The first assumes that you know the answer and are testing them.”

Teachers also nominate pupils to speak rather than allowing them to “bid” for the right to answer a question. “We don’t do hands up,” says Willmer. “The same children put their hands up all the time, some put their hands up whether they know the answer or not, and sometimes children will put their hands up as they know you will pick on the ones who don’t. It means that children are in control of the lesson. You

might make a list of children that you want to target during that lesson and you need to make sure you speak to every child over a period of time."

Teachers must be prepared to challenge and argue with pupils. And listening to and responding appropriately to their answers is vital as they provide important clues about the child's thinking process. But, just as pupils need thinking time, so do teachers: there is nothing wrong with pausing for a moment to think about an answer.



## Dialogic teaching in action

The dialogue below followed a class reading of two stories. Note the way the teacher focuses on drawing out one child using a chain of thinking, and arguing with him rather than praising. The teacher doesn't repeat Jack's answers and moves on to the next pupil using nomination rather than bidding.

**TEACHER:** Jack, please tell us which story you preferred and why.

**JACK:** I preferred *At the Zoo* because it was very mysterious and you didn't find out what was looking at what until the very end. Because when I first read the story I thought there were some new arriving animals and the children were looking at them for a school project. But at the end I found that these aliens were actually looking at humans at the zoo and

the humans were the new arrivals.

**TEACHER:** The story sounds very confusing. When did you understand that the children were in the cages?

**JACK:** Oh, not until the very end. In fact, the first time I read it I didn't get it at all. It took two readings and then I thought, "Now I know what's going on!"

**TEACHER:** But on our list of what makes a book worth reading that we wrote earlier, we put

### BUT WILL IT WORK WITH MY ROWDY YEAR 9?

It's easy to see how sustaining a dialogue might be possible on a one-to-one or small-group basis, but isn't it much harder - or even impossible - in a whole class situation, particularly with challenging pupils? The first step is to create a culture in which dialogic teaching can happen.

"Before you start any of this you have to work on listening skills," says Willmer. "We work on what good listening looks like - how they should sit, where their hands should be, what their eyes should be doing. We also use things like talk and listen cards. One pupil has a talk card and one a listen card and they have to swap so they learn about turn-taking. You can then extend that to the whole class so everybody listens and only the person with the talk card is allowed to speak. Moving from what good listening looks like to actually listening takes time, but they do get to grips with it. It does work well with a whole class - you can have an extended dialogue with one child and the other children do listen and learn from each other."

Crucially, Alexander is not suggesting that dialogue should be used in isolation.

Rather, it should be seen as part of a repertoire of methods in which instruction, exposition, discussion - and even rote - all have their place. As Willmer puts it: "You can't teach dialogically if they have no knowledge of a subject, so you have to cover that first."

### CHALLENGING CURRENT ORTHODOXY

Dialogic pedagogy calls into question things that teachers may accept uncritically as good practice, such as the "pacy" lesson. Obviously, lessons should not drag, but constantly moving on does not always leave time for the development and reflection that is part of the dialogic process. Alexander is also critical of the tendency to give unspecific praise along the lines of "well done" and "that's brilliant" - sometimes so often that it becomes meaningless. Instead, considered feedback, that moves children's understanding on as well as being encouraging, is more important.

There are also some aspects of dialogic teaching that are counter-intuitive. It often feels natural to repeat a child's answer, perhaps to clarify their point for the class, or because they have spoken too softly. However, teachers should fight this urge, says Willmer. "It gives the message to the child that they don't need to speak loudly as you'll do it for them. It also gives the message to the other children that they don't need to listen to each other as they know you're going to say it, so the only person that it's important to listen to is you." And, of course, in true dialogic teaching, nothing could be further from the truth. [\[1\]](#)

■ For more information on Alexander's research, visit [www.robinaalexander.org.uk/dialogicteaching.htm](http://www.robinaalexander.org.uk/dialogicteaching.htm)

■ Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, Oxford: Blackwell

■ Alexander, R.J. (2008) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk* (4th edition), York: Dialogos

■ Smith, F., Hardman, F., Wall, K. and Mroz, M. (2004) *Interactive whole class teaching in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies*. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(3): 395-412

"EASY TO READ". *At the Zoo* doesn't sound like it was an easy story if you had to read it twice to understand it...

**JACK:** Yes, but the words were easy. The story wasn't. The story was a mystery and I like mysteries, so that is why I like *At the Zoo* better.

**TEACHER:** So Jack prefers *At the Zoo*. What about you, Karen?

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