

Introduction

The research question framed in the original proposal was as below:

'Are there benefits to Dialogic Teaching in a Scottish and American Primary School System?'

The background to this question was an abiding interest in talking and listening-in, and 'separate' from Oracy and its interdependence with cognition and effective pedagogy.

I spent two weeks in two American States from the middle of October 2017.

The comparisons I envisioned were going to be made in disparate contexts-both educationally and culturally. The picture I found in two differing American States in some ways reflects my own local authority where there are great pockets of wealth and poverty as well as contrasting cultural expectations linked to families and the different local environments.

There are structural differences which reflect the divergent historical development of educational governance in both countries: Scotland and the USA but there were many commonalities in the challenges we face in both our societies and in our school communities.

As well as working in my own school in Fife I travelled to visit two States: Montana, firstly then Ohio.

Montana

Montana is the third largest State in the Union and has a small population spread around its vast expanse. When travelling in the USA many years prior to this visit I found the landscape, people and history fascinating and illustrative of some of the challenges America and its peoples-past and present have faced.

I visited-and was allowed the privilege to do so the Northern Cheyenne Nation. This Nation has a long history of engaging with education out of adversity and now live in a fairly small Reservation near the bigger Crow Reservation about two hours' drive from the main city in Montana-Billings. I was to stay a week on the Reservation visiting the

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Northern Cheyenne Elementary School (a Federal school) and, although, my visit coincided with an INSET/In-Service Day (s) I could visit another school in the main town on the Nation in the town of Lame Deer-at Lame Deer Elementary. This school is State-funded and like its Lame Deer cousin has its educators stay in housing near to the school and in the communities they serve.



Ohio

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To the East and centre of America is Ohio. I visited the City of Hamilton-named after one of the Founding Fathers of this vast Nation. I visited two schools either side of the Great Miami River in Butler County, Hamilton. These schools were Riverside Elementary and Highland Elementary. Both were large primaries with student numbers up at seven hundred. They were also in fit-for-purpose new and spacious buildings. I stayed a week in these two schools-splitting my time between them.

The photo below is of Josh Margerum-Principal of Riverview Elementary in Hamilton, Ohio. He, and his Deputy Principal with other colleagues run a school of 700 learners. Notably the physical capacity and personnel they have at their disposal means oracy and communication is that bit easier on all fronts.



Why Dialogic Teaching?

A focus on speaking and listening as part of a multi-layered dialectic can enrich and nourish the basis and running of a classroom based on discovery, enquiry and collaboration. In addition, I wanted, albeit as part of a time-limited project in both countries to reconsider the what, and why of my teaching, and to reconsider (my) primary teaching at large.

The importance of this topic goes across all subjects to the very foundations of the purpose we educate-to create and support citizens of a stable and progressive society. In these troubled times the nature and effectiveness of this paradigm is both being usurped and manipulated from within, and without the political and educational domain.

The foundations of learning lie in the effectiveness of communication and the different mores and cultures established to promote them.

The book from which I first came across the concept-'dialogic teaching' (Robyn Alexander) 1 details the importance of children thinking for themselves before they truly understand and know. It has semantic and moral links to 'visible learning' as outlined by Professor John Hattie 2 and the 'inter-thinking' of Neil Mercer et al 3.

The first author above details the impact of using talking repertoires and how brain research validates the early use of the approach. The lack of discourse and time to allow the higher and non-linear modes of dialogue, discussion and exploration ultimately sees a possibly 'fatal' split between what is defined as learning and what is a real development of the individual into entering society as an effective and questioning citizen.

The research on Talk projects in the UK in which attainment has been raised did not ignore the content and subject matter linked to pedagogy but processes linked to higher attributes like analysis and evaluation were enhanced by a 'dialogicality of instruction' being applied.

An 'American' Perspective

I was born in the States and am a Dual National. I am Scottish by formation and, despite being back to the States to work and visit for short periods, I have had no real time to visit in American schools.

A systemic fall in public educational attainment affects both countries. In both societies this is part of a link to poverty, unemployment and a consumerist culture based on less interpersonal communication, not more. Every day there is the Pledge of Allegiance taken in American schools. Speaking-declarations, debate: Oracy are tools that lie at the heart of the American way to define itself and forge identity in a vast and diverse landscape where there must be common aims and purposes.

That the above is contested both in conceptual and practical terms may be roughly symbolised by the perceived conflict between the sitting President and the immediate previous President of the United States of America.

I wanted to establish the effectiveness in the American settings and my own of both the principles of 'dialogic teaching' and the 'empowering' broad categories: the Repertoires of talk that underpin them.

The principles being that dialogic teaching is collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful.

There is a paramount core to these key points of reference which is that learners are engaging with learning and articulating what they say about *their* experience of learning. It is matched with the educator's refusal to be a trans-missive cog in systems sometimes designed for a quick fix by taking time to say 'why' something is taught and the why of its presentation in a lesson.

The means by which all in the learning community communicate can be mediated by a Repertoire of talk (p38, Alexander 1):

- Transactional talk-it alludes to talking about a wide range of possible jobs and experiences or intentions
- Expository Talk-expounding the nature of a job/experience to explain it

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- Interrogatory Talk-using questioning in diverse contexts
- Exploratory Talk-exploring ideas and personal responses
- Expressive Talk-articulating feelings and making your own personal response(s)
- Evaluative Talk-what could be done or thought and making judgements

Importantly, more 'linear' forms of talk like recitation or e.g. exhortation as well as simply 'teacher talk' are not less important but part of a wide and richly crafted mix.

The frustration of academics in the educational field linked to Oracy is, perhaps, that the push for curricular content and standards to be measured in certain time frames, and for that to be cost effective, means the empowerment of dialogic teaching is referred to but not validated by allowing time or organising resources so learners can truly engage with the 'why' and 'how'-and not just the 'what' of their learning.

Methodology

The use of audio recordings and digital analysis of types of dialogic teaching and responses in real-time teaching was considered to be impractical given the nature and timescales involved linked to the process of getting into the different schools in the USA.

My Personal Context

Our school has around 270 learners is non-denominational and has one Nursery attached to the main building and one Nursery located off-campus. Historically, the lack of employment since the demise of mining and the levels of various deprivation indicators means that there are challenges (similar to ones I found in the USA) regarding attainment, levels of parental engagement and motivation in students.

The class I currently teach are a lower stage class and it is a composite class: it has two year groups in it. There is a wide range of need in the class but equally some students are gaining independence and are beginning to be able to forge ahead with new and creative ideas if encouraged.

Setting a Baseline

The new session was the first for our new Headteacher and there has been hard work put in to begin initiatives across the curriculum, culture and ethos to encourage transformational change in the school and beyond.

Against this background I decided to record only a small focus group of six students on audio files. I selected the group from across the ability range in literacy as recorded for assessment relating to the Curriculum for Excellence-AfC levels. The small group would also be used for a Class Journal used for focused observation and notes.

The frame for the assessment was a child-friendly wording-or so I estimated of the talking Repertoire for everyday life 1 (p38):

DIFFERENT TYPES OF TALK

1 Can you talk about doing a job or activity?

2 Can you explain how to do or make something well or at all?

3 Can you ask questions in different activities or places?

4 Can you talk about yours' or a friend's feelings?

5 Can you talk about if something went well or not?

In trialling the questions I quickly added a 'why' you can talk... to the questions and to give a recent example of where they might have talked using the Different Types of Talk 1-5 range.

These were completed in September while a survey for parents or carers with the same wording but asking for *their* assessment of the same students was completed in early October.

The latter survey had a 67% return and was very positive about the students' abilities. More of this and the ramifications and meaning of this will be discussed below.

There was a plan to complete a similar Baseline with another class as well as their use of a symbolised poster of the different types of talk. In my class there are 'Talk Rules' which are also symbolised see Appendix 1 a. The colleague who is in year one of her post-probation career did try but with the work we all had to undertake it was unfair to encourage her to add yet another item to her workload.

I did talk about what I was doing e.g. using my own assessments of talk Appendix 2 in lessons to encourage collaborative work as well as using English Speaking Union (ESU) resources. The App. 2 document was designed to be used with a talk-specific Learning Intention that would encourage a range of talking to be observed.

In talking to colleagues and with good knowledge of the classes in our department the results in my class could be similar: low levels of responses and verbal fluency out with a small group.

American Visits

The schools I arranged to visit in Montana were to be in different socio-economic areas and I aimed to observe the levels of dialogical teaching and the elements of dialectic observable in the classroom learning environments. In addition, I aimed to gauge the wider influence in the above of historical, cultural and economic influences on the talk and ethos used in the school communities. Language and types of talk are powerful lodestones on what exactly is made important in the life and words of a school.

The key link in Montana was the Head of Tribal Education in the Northern Cheyenne Nation. An esteemed, experienced and open colleague she facilitated and organised school visits and any accommodation arrangements.

Ohio

I was born in Ohio and I arranged for my brother there to organise visits to schools in contrasting (as far as was possible) housing areas. The two elementaries I visited did have different student population make-ups but a similar level of resourcing. The contact was the Publicity Officer for Butler County in Hamilton. She was very helpful despite being very busy. This open and positive attitude was reflected in the warm welcome given by the American Principals of the Ohio schools.

Ohio and Montana

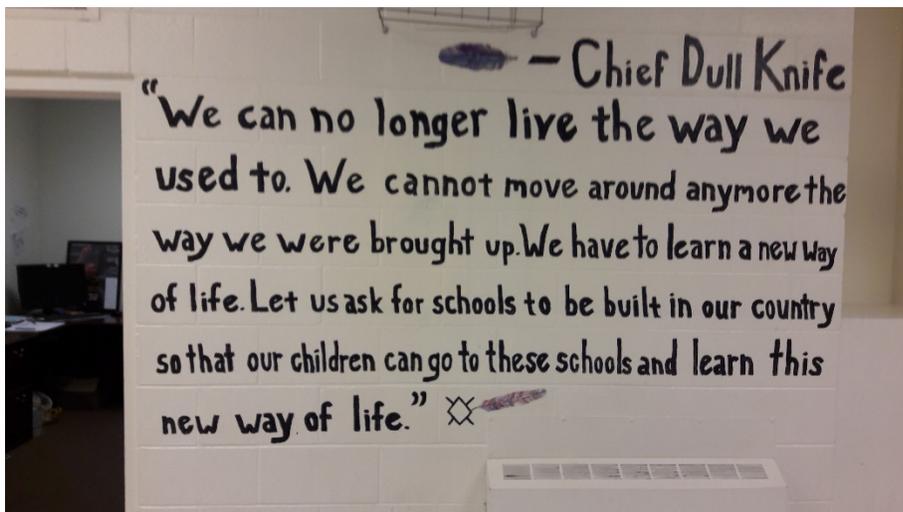
In both States I used the assessment sheet based on the Repertoires to gauge the levels of talk in observed lessons and to then compare it both with themselves and with my own class and school in Scotland. In both States I was given a large amount of time to seek and get, or gain knowledge and understanding about all facets of staffing, resourcing and governance. I came across a number of initiatives and resources- sometimes linked together that aimed to address low attainment and the need to get

students to communicate better, think more deeply, and clearly as well as be more collaborative with their peers.



Above is a Grade 5 Culture class with Ms Spotted Eagle, Cheyenne Culture educator. The need to strengthen the Cheyenne language is a priority amongst pressing social issues-like ours and is worked toward by attending one period daily of Culture Class.

The importance of education was one reason I went to the Nation. Their founding fathers-in educational terms was Chief Dull Knife. This quote is in the school at Busby:



Results

The base question was: *Is dialogic teaching effective?*

To answer the question I had an in-depth insight into the vision and values and curricula of two States within the limited frame of a few schools for example within the vast State of Montana. The impact of changing education budgets and high demand for results-or to raise them ran/runs across all schools, including my own.

A limitation in this small research project was the limited time I had in classes to see the communication and mores of the oral culture in place. This was mitigated by the large number of teachers I met in all four schools and the In-Service training I undertook with the Lame Deer Staff over two days. This gave me an insight into the high degree of personal responsibility teachers have to teach, and mine data-and implement new software designed to reap even more accurate data. This facet of American education may link to a need to absorb and seek your own role or voice but speak with the 'whole' culture within a Nation of States. The difficulty of unity is one historically underpinned by the journey-and a hard one at that which the United States has undertaken in its history.

In the Northern Cheyenne the legacy of discrimination and subjugation is not helped by the difference in language structure of the Cheyenne language. It has a limited phonetic range compared to English-and its Elders who are monoglots are becoming less and less in number within the community.

To support analysis of the results I have used the themes that seemed to me to be most obvious across the visits and linked to my own school ethos, climate, resources and path towards developing a craft of dialogic teaching in my practice.

Teaching and Making Talk Central to an Empowering Pedagogy

I did not formally record the levels of Talk in all classes I visited in the four America schools. The levels of 'rote, recitation' (1) and expository learning did sometimes predominate across the classrooms **but** there were, I believe, important and key exceptions-see below.

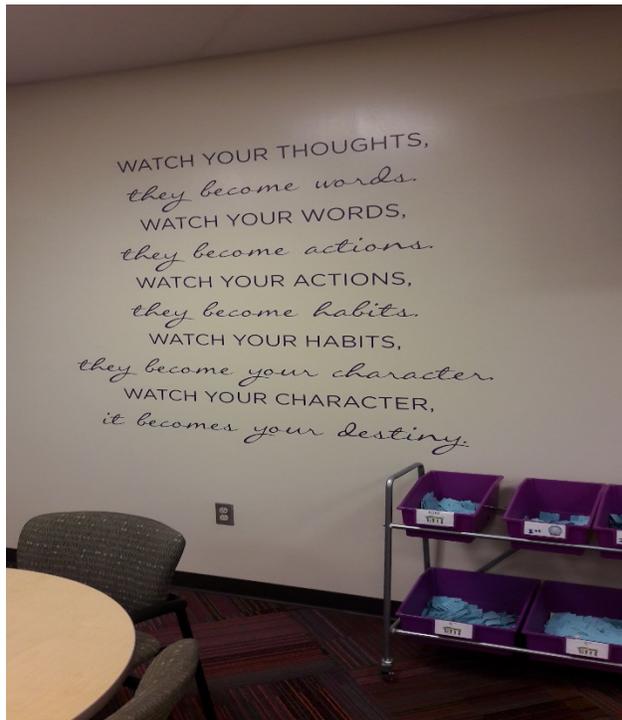
It has to be noted that a strong phenomenon was the real depth of interest in all schools for me to speak and engage with the learners of all ages.

In all classes I was made welcome-even interviewed by the 'television crew'* (below) in Highland Elementary. The importance of talk and discussion was encouraged and exemplified by the Principals and could be evidenced by speaking to their Staffs. Yes, they were crises like our school communities regarding specific learners and families but there was a desire to live up to e.g. the values of their different schools. These Values did count and were known and underpinned learning in the classes.



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The Reception at Highland Elementary below:



The Appendix A-B document is a record of a lesson in Montana. I used the first 20 minutes of any lesson to assess the levels of e.g. discussion, scaffolded dialogue and underpinning of dialectic in the learning at large.

The lesson was largely linked to a previous lesson and to do with a set text from a scheme where the teacher was using an instructional guide.

Yet, what is not evidenced by this is the high degree of necessary classroom control the teacher had with some challenging situations to deal with (this teacher had no Smartboard and computers in his class) and the clear links he had to previous learning.

Crucially, in this setting the importance of the culture and links to community are there the teacher was a white American but had a real affinity for the Nation-class display below.



The danger in a mechanistic approach to measuring talk and the primacy of the subject matter engaging children was shown by the scaffolded and rich play set up in a Kindergarten at one of the Ohio schools. A group was withdrawn by a Play Specialist to a central area -different groups are withdrawn from the set of classes. There is a

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structured introduction of e.g. differing food stuffs. The layered teacher talk was a necessity and empowering as the children were lacking social and personal skills for a number of reasons. 'Only' one of the children engaged in questioning others but the engagement and non-verbal alignment was a powerful lesson to the need for a wider perception of Talk. The students benefitting from this highly nurturing and scaffolded approach to play and talk come from home environments where poverty and English as a second language influences can have an effect on student learning.

Across the majority of the schools in the USA and suggested in the above was the notable disparity in teaching and other staff to Scotland (the American schools *did* have Counsellors, Family Workers based in schools, shared Speech Pathologists as well as shared Psychologists; and the use of Nurture Rooms for small Learning groups) needed for children to develop talk and develop a personal efficacy to engage in what education is- a social process. This was mirrored for example in Lane Deer by classrooms that were designed and better equipped for the digital age than our own (below).



America has had many challenges and faces more but like Scotland its history in education has had a lasting legacy. Looking at theorists of American education and in my own studies I have come across the openness and desire to do the best for children as full citizens not just learners in an educational system as expressed by John Dewey 4:

'Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself.' P3

'..school itself shall be made a genuine form of community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons' P11

'..(children are sent to school for discipline)..yet it is the one place in the world where it is most difficult to get experience the MOTHER of all discipline worth the name.' P15

These observations hold true today as society reels from the challenges it faces.

'Exceptions', 'Norms' and Toward Dialogic Teaching

The document (C-Appendix 1-same Talk Types as B) shows the 'high' levels of Interrogatory Talk from the Talk repertoires in a lesson I observed in a Highland Elementary lesson. It was to do with a real book and had a sequencing task given after the book had been discussed in depth with the class.

The lesson was excellent but could be viewed as below a high dialogic level. In contrast-perhaps an extension of this level was the use of dialogue and strong discussion evidenced in a Grade 2 class I visited during my last two days (not recorded but witnessed) where a resource developed by the University of Miami (Ohio) was being used (*Literacy Collaborative*). Talk related to individual reading and class texts was used to deepen and extend thinking. The rich dialogue and open thinking of the class responding to a teacher (and text) was something that had been nourished by a teacher who was responsible for supporting colleagues to use this new resource.

The approach will be developed in the two Ohio schools I was in and its rationale shares much with the 'real' book approach of the Workshop of Literacy methodology Fife has been developing. In both countries real purposeful engagement, not just participation in a line of lessons is reflected in the aim of the two approaches but they do not negate the need for high levels of teacher exposition and talk across curricular areas to meet American testing regimes and Scottish curricular needs-where testing is to play a bigger part.

In both countries much is explained and instructed by a teacher in lessons to support later development of discussion or a dialogical evolution of talk. The interaction of teacher and class means that is a crafted phenomenon not a simplistic model that can be set up on a short term basis. Even so, in a single lesson above-and in my own context, gradually, there can emerge a rich variety of talk and experiences modelled by the teacher. That this can be interrupted by those students with adverse life experiences is, perhaps, much better addressed, in some American schools based upon my small assessment than in my context.

Class Results

The audio recordings in my class revealed the low level of talk in the class in the focus group and this, possibly, is reflective of the vast majority of the group, my class and my colleagues' class.

After nearly a Term highlighting 'Talk' as a 'check' or 'assessment' of what we thought and using the Talk types I realised my time-scales and understanding was faulty. Unlike Dewey I was not thinking in the experiential terms of the children.

The positive results from the parent survey perhaps reflected the optimistic and engaged frame of reference these parents have. Turn out for Shared Starts is high and for events like a Roald Dahl Day Morning there is a good attendance.

In talking to the Focus Group the second time, unlike the first when only one student spoke at any 'great' length at all-this time all but one spoke about Talking. One student even noted we used Talking to 'help us' in writing. Yet their understanding of Talk was, of course, unlike *my* perception dependent on what *they* were feeling, or had experienced-which was limited. It comes back to the importance of social experience and individual empowerment within a community suggested by Dewey.

Both my class and the classes I visited in America have/had numbers below 20; in the classes where numbers were higher (in older age groups than Scotland has at primary school) the practicality of the strong use of a path to dialogic teaching seemed to be more challenging.

Conclusions

It may be the real dynamic to the Base research question is not is it effective? Rather, it is how everyday reality and resourcing can stop the proven social, cultural, psychological, pedagogical, neuroscientific and communicative benefits of using a dialogic approach.

The real progression in ability in such a few pressured Term(s)-in my class and the effectiveness of scaffolded resources in which talk is always central in the two American States suggest the power of using Talk as *part* of a dialogic approach.

It also suggests the continued need and moral imperative for teachers to value the individual. The full meaning of primary or elementary means never to engage in designing a simple litany or line of lessons. The dynamic of establishing what children see as the truth of what *their* learning is or what *they* experience is important.

The space and will to engage with learners and learn by, and with them, can create a critical mass to forge a rich partnership within a class.

REFERENCES

1 Alexander, Robin (2017 5th Edition) *Towards Dialogic Teaching-Rethinking Classroom Talk*, Cambridge: Dialogos.

2 Hattie, John (2016) *Visible Learning Into Action-International Cases Studies of Impact*, Routledge, London & New York.

3 Littlejohn, Karen and Mercer, Neil (2013) *Interthinking: Putting talk to work*, Routledge.

4 Dewey, John (1900/15) *The School and Society*, The University of Chicago Press; from Chapter 1-The School and Social Progress.

Appendix 1

Talk Rules

- **Talk one at a time.** 
- **Respect each other's opinions.** 
- **If you disagree say why.** 
- **You are allowed to ask questions.** 

Parent Signature _____



| | | |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Transactional Talk-covers a wide range-to convey and exchange meaning and intention.</p> | <p>IV - II -Teacher ↓ IIF</p> <p>IIII Between students</p> | |
| <p>Expository Talk-to expound and explain.</p> | | |
| <p>Interrogatory Talk-the use of questioning in diverse contexts.</p> | <p>III Teachers</p> | |
| <p>Exploratory Talk-exploring ideas and probing others' thinking.</p> | | |
| <p>Expressive Talk-articulating feelings and making personal responses.</p> | <p>III students - teachers</p> | |
| <p>Evaluative Talk-delivering opinions and making judgements.</p> | <p>II-Teachers</p> | |

- leader.

Date: _____ 2017 _____

| Evidence | Number of instances (all?) | Comments |
|---------------|---|---|
| Transitional | T 111 111 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Numbers: different parts of 2 lessons T = teacher C = class |
| Expository | T 1111 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 = 1 individual |
| Interrogatory | T 111 11 5/ 11 6/ 111 111 111 111 111 111 T 111 111 111 111 111 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8 = Talk from a book and with the class. |
| Expository | T 111 111 111 111 | |
| Expository | T 111 111 111 111 | |
| Expository | T 111 111 111 111 | <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>sort a sequence due distans 7/ 1111111111 - 5 right words - the lady who was not afraid of anything - book</p> </div> |

Grade 2 - Ohio