

# Teaching through and for Dialogue (Notes to accompany the one day course)



Learning *through* dialogue. Learning *for* dialogue.

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21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners

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## Introduction

### What is Dialogue?

We might think that we are engaged in dialogue with students whenever we are interacting orally with them – in a question and answer session, for example. But is this the case or are there features that distinguish dialogue from other types of classroom interaction?

The word ‘dialogue’ does not, as some people seem to think, refer only to an interaction between two people. The Greek roots of the term are ‘dia’ which is taken to mean ‘through’ or ‘across’ and ‘logos’ meaning ‘speech’ or ‘reason’. We might than ask what is it that people are speaking or reasoning across or through? One answer to this question is that they are reasoning across the difference between their personal perspective and another perspective (be that the perspective of one or more other people with whom they are speaking or the perspective of the author of a text they are reading or a perspective that has been at the back of their mind since they heard it or read it some time ago).

The important point here is that to engage in dialogue is to acknowledge and respond to other perspectives; to seek to understand them, to be sensitive to the differences between them and one’s own understandings and to use these differences as a resource to generate new perspectives and to achieve richer understandings of ideas and of other people. To enter into dialogue is not to endeavour to impose one’s own view or to uncritically accept the view of a more authoritative other, but rather to engage in a shared search for understanding and meaning; it is to enter into a relationship based on mutual respect.

There is a great deal of theory around the nature of dialogue and some understanding of the central ideas can deepen teachers’ thinking about the subject and indeed influence their practice. A very brief introduction is given here.

The Jewish thinker **Martin Buber** encourages us to think about dialogue in terms of the way in which we relate to others. He distinguishes between what he calls just experiencing others and entering into relation with them. When we experience others we see them as objects external to ourselves; we seek to learn about them, but always from our own external perspective: ‘The man who experiences has not part in the world. For it is ‘in him’ and not between him and the world that the experience arises. (The world) does nothing to the experience, and the experience does nothing to it’ (Buber, 1958: p 13). Buber referred to this as an ‘I-It’ attitude which, although necessary for day-to-day life, does not allow one to enter into genuine dialogue but rather to engage in instrumental transactions. In the ‘I-Thou’ attitude by contrast, we encounter the other as a whole being; rather than gaining experience of each other in our individual minds, we encounter each other in a space that Buber referred to as the ‘in-between’ – our minds enter into relation with each other. ‘Relation is mutual. My thou affects me as I affect it.’ (Buber, 1958: p 20) For Buber entering into dialogue involves entering into an ‘I-Thou’ relationship with the other.

**Mikhail Bakhtin**, the Russian philosopher and literary theorist, provides us with a commonly referenced definition of dialogue as interaction in which every answer gives rise to another question; this leads us to think of dialogue as an unending process or quest for truth, not a short exchange in which ‘correct’ answers are accepted uncritically. (Bakhtin 1986, p 168) Bakhtin also makes an important distinction between the ‘authoritative word’ and the ‘persuasive word’. The authoritative word instructs or transmits but does not call us into dialogue. Consider a sign that says ‘No smoking’: we can accept or reject the instruction, but we are not invited to seek further understanding of it. The persuasive word in contrast is framed with us in mind – it might take on our own vocabulary or concerns, for example. It ‘enters into us’ and stimulates our own answering words, calling us to think and make meaning. Bakhtin might argue that the dialogic persuasive voice is essential for deeper learning as to truly understand something we need to be able to express it ourselves with our own words.

The brief descriptions given above might be sufficient to make us question the idea that all oral interaction in the classroom is a form of dialogue. So, from a more practical point of view, how might we recognise exchanges in the classroom that are more ‘dialogic’? Robin Alexander, whose work on dialogic teaching has been central to its development in the UK, offers us a set of principles which might usefully guide us (Alexander, 2017: p 27-28). He states that dialogic teaching should be:

- Collective (the classroom is a site of joint learning and enquiry);
- Reciprocal (participants **listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints**);
- Supportive (participants feel able to **express ideas freely**, without risk of embarrassment over ‘wrong’ answers, and they **help each other to reach common understandings**);
- Cumulative (participants **build on their own and each other’s contributions and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and understanding**);
- Purposeful (classroom talk, though open and dialogic, is structured with specific learning goals in view).

The bolded text provides us with some useful indicators of what classroom dialogue might involve. The section on ‘ground rules’ later in this chapter is also concerned with developing a shared understanding of what dialogue might ‘look like’ in the classroom.

## Why is Dialogue Educationally Valuable?

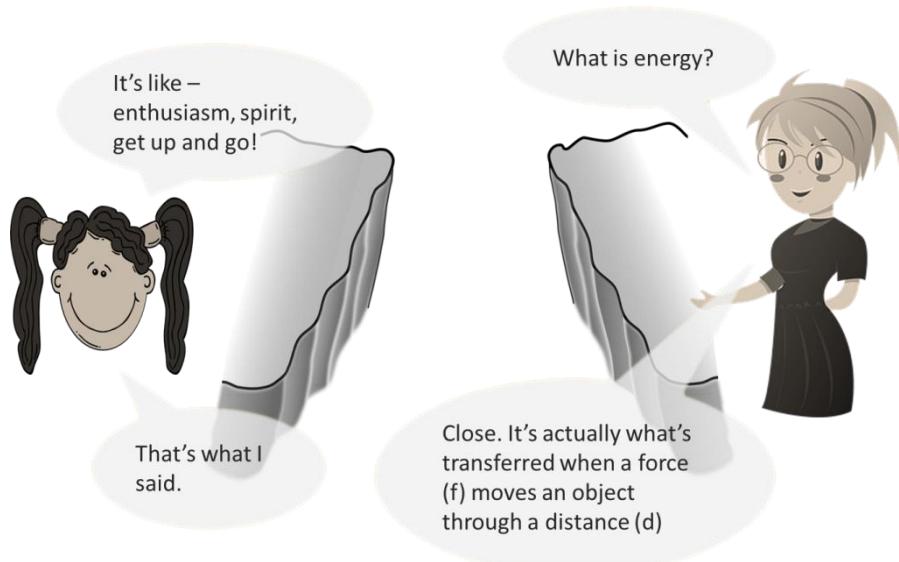
There are numerous educational advantages to teaching children to get better at dialogue. Some of them are listed below. Perhaps the first two are of the most practical significance for us, but others are briefly included by way of ‘a nod’ to the bigger picture:

### 1. Dialogue supports the meaningful acquisition of knowledge and allows us to build bridges between everyday understandings and the perspectives of school subjects

Our discussion of Bakhtin touched on the idea of the persuasive voice that stimulates our own answering words and calls us to think and make meaning as opposed to an authoritative voice that simply ‘tells’. This is important because meaningful knowledge cannot simply be transmitted from one person to another. We make sense of all new ideas or concepts by relating them to our existing understandings of the world which are formed from our previous experiences. Since people have

different experiences it seems inevitable that they will come to understand new ideas in different ways. When we engage in dialogue we become aware of the differences between the meanings that we have made and those that others have made (and the meaning that the teacher intended!). As we ‘reason across difference’ we actively re-construct knowledge through a process involving listening, explaining, reflecting, questioning, comparing, distinguishing, connecting, evaluating and so on.

This view of learning is consistent with the ideas of the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (2012). Vygotsky thought that the development of all ‘higher mental functions’, including the development of understanding of the kinds of concepts that we teach in schools, is a social process: development happens first in dialogue on the ‘social plane’ and is then internalised and appears on the ‘psychological plane’.



Vygotsky argued that the kinds of concepts we teach in school (he called them scientific concepts) are quite different from the concepts that children develop naturally in the course of everyday life (everyday concepts). In the picture above, the child has a clear sense of the meaning of the word energy, but her meaning is not the same as the science teacher’s meaning. Young people will have plenty of everyday experience of the concept of love, but will probably not be familiar with the way that the term is used in Christian theology or in other faith traditions. It’s important to note that everyday concepts are not wrong – they serve a perfectly good purpose outside of school and indeed they are essential starting points for the development of ‘scientific concepts’. We need to value them and build bridges between the young people’s perspectives of what words mean and the perspectives of school subjects and teachers. Learning to see things from different perspectives, to reason across difference, is just what we learn in dialogues. We are providing young people with the social plane on which to construct new meaning and deeper understanding.

## **2. Dialogue offers the teacher a window onto what has been learned.**

Let me illustrate this with an example. A group of Year 4 pupils engaged in dialogue in groups of three to sort statements according to whether they provided examples of melting, freezing,

evaporation or condensation. After checking their answers with the teacher's answers one pupil, we'll call her Lorna, questioned the idea that 'Lava becomes solid rock as it cools down' is an example of freezing. Here's a short extract of the subsequent discussion:

T: Why do you say it can't be freezing?

L: Because it's too hot. Not just the lava – on those islands where they have volcanoes it's just too hot.

T: What temperature would it need to be for lava to freeze?

L: Well, things freeze when they are really cold – zero degrees.

T: Does anyone want to respond to what Lorna has said?

In the dialogue it emerges that Lorna has taken freezing to mean something becoming a solid at zero degrees centigrade. Now that this misconception is visible, the teacher can invite others to challenge it and provide Lorna with an experience through which she can re-construct her understanding. This is a valuable form of **feedback** that is dynamic – it actively involves the learner in re-constructing their understanding. The teacher can also think about how to respond to this misconception in subsequent teaching – what new experiences might challenge Lorna to re-think her idea? Thus dialogue has become a powerful **Assessment for Learning** tool.

### **3. Teaching for better dialogue is a way of teaching for better thinking**

There is growing evidence that dialogic teaching is an effective way to teach general and transferable thinking skills and dispositions (Wegerif, 2018). In dialogues we learn to engage with other points of view in caring, collaborative, creative and critical ways. These dispositions – the way in which we orientate ourselves to other perspectives – are learned through thinking together with others and can then become internalised; they can become part of the way we think as individuals and can complement rigorous disciplinary knowledge across the curriculum. This is again consistent with Vygotsky's notion that the 'higher functions' are learned through social interaction.

### **4. Dialogic teaching introduces students to the 'dialogue of humanity'**

Taking a dialogic view of education might say something about one's view of knowledge. One way to understand the term dialogic is to contrast it with monologic. From the point of view of monologic everything has one correct meaning; there is one authoritative perspective on the world. But is our knowledge of the world authoritative? Are the laws of science, once discovered, fixed and immutable? Is our understanding of the significance of historical events universally agreed and final? From the point of view of dialogic, knowledge is not fixed and final but is **provisional**. Our knowledge is the best answers we currently have to the questions we have posed; as the answers and indeed the questions themselves are refined (or radically changed) so is what counts as knowledge. The 'best that has been thought and said' (Arnold, 1869/2006) is important, but it is not the final word. Another way of expressing this might be to say that all human knowledge is part of an ongoing dialogue – the dialogue of humanity – and the task of education is to bring young people into that

dialogue. Teachers can support this by acknowledging the provisional nature of knowledge and the value of different perspectives, by helping students to see how academic knowledge is connected to their experiences and concerns and encouraging students to believe that they may have something valuable to contribute to the ongoing dialogue.

## 5. Being able to engage in dialogue has wider benefits

Whether we encounter differences in perspective about mathematics, football, politics or religion and whether we encounter these perspectives in conversation, in a book or on the internet the ability to engage in dialogue helps us to reach a better understanding of the other. It can offer us **protection against extreme views** and allow us to remain open to new learning. The skills of dialogue are essential if one is to become an **active citizen** and take part in the kind of **deliberative democracy** envisaged by thinkers such as Dewey, Rawls and Habermas.

The philosopher Dmitri Nikulin (2010) tells us that ‘Dialogue is a therapy – perhaps *the* therapy – against the misrecognition of one person by another’. In a world in which so much suffering is caused by the failure of one person to recognise the humanity of another, we might argue that not teaching dialogue is an abdication of our **moral responsibility** as educators.

## To What Extent Do We Find Dialogue in the Classroom?

So how much of the oral interaction seen in classrooms is dialogic? Observational studies have tended to conclude ‘not much’ (although Vrikki et al. (2018) have offered some challenge to this idea).

Most teachers will be able to identify with research suggesting that a routine known as Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) is ubiquitous in schools (see Vrikki et al., 2018 and references therein). In this model of interaction teachers initiate discourse with questions that are often intended to check recall and require only brief responses from students; they then evaluate these responses with regard to their ‘correctness’ (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). The aim of such exchanges seems to be to ensure that correct answers have been memorised and can be recalled; students are being encouraged to uncritically accept the authoritative word rather than being called to think and make meaning on the social plane by the persuasive word and teachers are only engaging with students’ perspectives in a limited manner – the relationship is very much one of ‘I-It’.

Other studies have found that students are much more likely to be involved in ‘disputational talk’ (characterised by individuals trying to impose their views on others in an egocentric way) or ‘cumulative talk’ (characterised by individuals uncritically agreeing with each other in order to maintain group harmony) than they are in dialogue (Wegerif & Scrimshaw, 1998).

Perhaps it should be stressed at this point that forms of classroom talk other than dialogue are useful. Alexander (2017a) is keen to point out the value of the teacher using a repertoire of talk types (which includes exposition, recitation and rote), and Mortimer and Scott (2003) suggest that teachers need to match their ‘communicative approach’ to their teaching purpose; there are times when an authoritative approach (including the use of IRE) is needed.

However, if we are to support students to bridge the gap between their everyday perspectives and the perspectives of their subjects and their teachers and ultimately of the disciplines they are being introduced to, then we need to create more opportunities to engage them in dialogue.

## Teaching Through and For Dialogue

Good dialogue is harder to achieve than we might imagine (see, for example, Wegerif and Scrimshaw, 1998). Creating a classroom culture in which dialogue can flourish requires deliberate and reflective practise. Two approaches to teaching *for* dialogue are **developing ground rules as a tool for reflection** and developing good habits of teacher **facilitation**.

### Developing ground rules as a tool for reflection

Establishing ground rules can help us to begin to define what we mean by dialogue (or talk that is recognisably dialogic) and can provide us with a framework for progressively improving the quality of our dialogue. It might be useful to develop these ground rules with the students so that they come to have some sense of ownership over them. This conversation can easily be started by asking students to consider what dialogue (or perhaps ‘good talk for learning together’) involves and what makes it distinct from other ‘types’ of talk – perhaps show them some images of people talking and discuss which might best represent dialogue and why.

A next question might be ‘What simple rules should we all follow if we want to improve the quality of our talk for learning together?’ The rules that emerge may vary from classroom to classroom, but we might expect that there are common themes. A typical early set of ground rules might look something like this:

- We listen carefully and think about what we hear
- We never make fun of other people or their ideas
- We speak one at a time
- We try to understand other points of view
- We give reasons for what we think and ask others for their reasons

Groups can then use these ground rules to support them to reflect on the quality of their talk and set targets for improvement (see below). As the students’ experience of dialogue develops their rules might become more sophisticated. The authors of the Thinking Together project (Dawes et al, 2000) suggest that a useful set of ground rules might include commitments to:

- Sharing relevant knowledge;
- listening to everyone’s ideas attentively and treating them respectfully;
- accepting that claims should be challenged and that the reasons underpinning claims and challenges should be shared and explored;
- actively seeking and considering alternatives before any decisions are taken;
- taking shared responsibility for decisions;
- reaching agreement whenever possible.

The need to encourage students to reach agreement could be questioned in the light of the foregoing discussion about the nature of dialogue, but Littleton and Mercer, citing evidence from a number of authors, suggest that the effort to reach consensus (perhaps more importantly than the realisation of this goal) encourages students to engage more deeply with the views of others and to give more consideration to their own ideas and the reasons underpinning them (Littleton and Mercer, 2013, p. 88).

### **The 4Cs**

A more holistic framework for the development of dialogue is used in Philosophy for Children (P4C). The American educator Matthew Lipman developed P4C in the 1960s and 70s; he considered good thinking (which might include good thinking together, or dialogue) to be multi-dimensional (Lipman, 2003). His three proposed modes of thinking – critical, caring and creative – were later augmented with a fourth mode – collaborative – by UK educator Roger Sutcliffe. The four modes of thought are very much inter-related. Here is a brief description of each of the Cs:

**Critical:** Making good judgments based on criteria, giving and evaluating reasons, arguments and evidence, identifying assumptions, offering challenge

**Caring:** A) Caring for others – listening attentively and actively, respecting the right to an opinion, valuing others' ideas, being aware of the impact of our words on others; B) Caring for Dialogue – thinking carefully, respecting the ground rules, engaging fully, valuing the opportunity to develop your thinking

**Collaborative:** Responding to others, supporting others to articulate their ideas, being willing to share and speculate

**Creative:** Looking for other perspectives, switching point of view, making connections (between different concepts or between abstract ideas and lived experience, for example), finding examples, counter-examples, analogies and comparisons

The idea of balance is important here. If we are ever-so caring and collaborative but never take the time to challenge the consensus or look for other perspectives then the result will be some kind of uncritical 'group think', but if we are constantly offering challenge and introducing new ideas in a manner that shows no regard for those we are engaging with the result will be dispute and coercion. Good dialogue requires all four modes of thinking to be in harmony.

It may be that the students' early ground rules can be mapped onto the 4Cs to deepen their thinking about what is involved in good dialogue. We can then use the 4Cs as a framework for the development of **progress** with dialogue (see the section on **The Progress Toolkit**).

### **The Importance of Reflection**

Whatever the set of ground rules that are established, deliberate reflection is essential if they are to have the desired impact on the quality of talk. The value of **metacognition** and self-regulation to effective learning has become well-recognised (you can find a useful summary of the evidence at <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit>).

Metacognition involves developing a conscious awareness of the strategies used to tackle a problem

and developing the capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies and adapt them accordingly. The ground rules represent an explicit statement of the strategies used to make thinking together effective. Teachers can guide students to identify when specific ground rules are being followed and to reflect on the impact they have on the dialogue and on progress towards tackling the problem at hand. The responsibility for the regulation of dialogue passes from the teacher (external regulation) to the group (co-regulation) and to the individual student (self-regulation) (Littleton and Mercer, 2013, pp. 100-103).

Reflection on the ground rules and their application may prompt some revision of the ground rules and it will allow the group to identify skills and dispositions that they need to focus on. These skills can be made the focus of subsequent sessions; lesson objectives may refer to both subject knowledge and the quality of talk. The value of skills such as ‘finding real examples to make your idea clearer’ can be openly discussed and the skill itself (including the features of language that might be indicative of its use) can be modelled. In addition to reviewing the content of the learning at the end of a session, the progress made with the focus skills and dispositions can also be reviewed and fresh targets can be set.

Some simple strategies for reviewing the quality of talk are:

**www.ebi (What went well? Even better if...):** This is a memorable prompt that first encourages the group to celebrate the progress they are making with dialogue before thinking about targets for improvement.

**Emojis:** Asking the students to choose the emoji that best represents how they feel after participating in dialogue can provide rapid visual feedback to the group and lead to further reflection. It may be, for example, that several students have chosen the ‘mouth zipped up’ emoji to show that they felt that they were unable to contribute. This should be a concern for the group and should lead to some discussion of how participation can be maximised in future sessions

**Appointed observers:** It can be a challenge to participate in a dialogue and to look out for examples of the group following (or not following their ground rules). During whole-class discussions it can be useful to appoint one or two students (or adults) to observe and report back on the quality of talk, particularly with reference to identified targets.

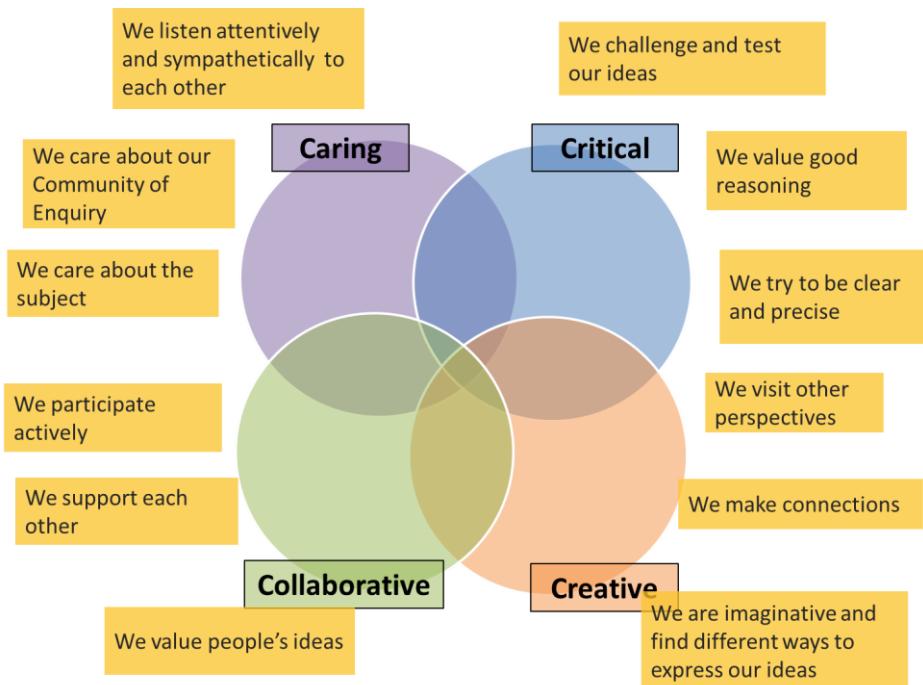
**Video reviews:** If students are comfortable to have their dialogues recorded it can be very useful to review short videos that help to illustrate the value of the class ground rules.

**Space for personal reflection:** It is certainly valuable to have the students to reflect on the quality of their dialogue as a group, but it is also useful to provide time for individuals to reflect on the skills and dispositions they are exhibiting. Providing individuals with a ‘talk diary’ in which they can reflect on their performance with respect to the class ground rules can be valuable.

## The Progress Toolkit

The notion of progress with the quality of dialogue is essential if groups are to avoid ‘plateauing’ at a relatively superficial level where ideas are politely exchanged but no real ‘thinking together’ is done. This is the deliberate ‘teaching for dialogue’ that characterises all successful dialogic teaching approaches.

The spreadsheet tool accompanying this course adopts the 4Cs as a framework for thinking about dialogue and its development. It offers a set of ‘overarching’ ground rules linked to the 4Cs. These are illustrated on the diagram below:



The spreadsheet then breaks down the overarching ground rules into simpler, more precise rules that can be introduced to students at various stages in their development (the notion of ‘early’, ‘mid’, and ‘late’ stage development is used). For example, the overarching rule ‘We challenge and test our ideas’ is broken down into the following components:

- We say whether we agree or disagree with an idea and we say why (early)
- We offer counter-arguments and counter-examples (mid)
- We spot assumptions (mid)
- We spot faulty reasoning (late)
- We explore the consequences of our ideas (late)

The intention here is to give teachers a bank of ground rules (to supplement those suggested by the students), supporting them to think about what progress for their group might ‘look like’ by asking themselves, ‘What’s missing? How can I deepen the dialogue? Which ground rules should I introduce next? **The suggested rules are not to be taken as authoritative!** They can be edited, and the stage at which they are introduced is, of course, flexible; the process of adapting the spreadsheet can perhaps be the focus of an ongoing dialogue between teachers (and students) about what good dialogue might involve.

The spreadsheet also offers numerous language scaffolds to support students to understand and use the ground rules. For example, students trying to develop their capacity to support and seek to understand others might make use of the following scaffolds:

- “Can X say more about...?”
- “I would like to ask X a question about...”

- “I would like to build on something that X said.”
- “I agree / disagree with X because...”
- “Can I just check, X – are you saying that...?”

Questions that a facilitator might use to elicit this kind of language from the students are also included (see the section on facilitation). Finally, the spreadsheet is linked to a set of **skills building activities** that can be used for the deliberate practise of all of the skills linked to the ground rules (an example is included in the appendices).

## Lesson Structure / Grouping

Teaching dialogically needn’t be confined to ‘special’ lessons – it should become a part of a teacher’s repertoire and should happen spontaneously as a teacher makes in-the-moment decisions about their pedagogy. This said, it may be useful for the practice to start from (and perhaps continue to be ‘fuelled by’) ‘special’ sessions that are planned with teaching through and for dialogue in mind.

These sessions are likely to feature both whole-group and small-group activities and can be greatly improved by a consideration of the classroom layout.

For whole-group sessions a circle or horseshoe layout (with or without desks) can have real advantages as it allows all participants to see each other and so facilitates deeper listening and responding. It also allows the teacher to take up a position within the circle; this might signal that in this particular mode the teacher is not seeking to put more authoritative knowledge in but rather to facilitate the students’ thinking about the knowledge they have already engaged with. Even in small-group sessions of three or more a circular (or in the case of threes triangular) seating arrangement will be useful.

A suggested planning frame for sessions focused on dialogue is shared during the course, and features the following three sections (and a prompt to consider the teacher’s **‘accountability to knowledge’** – see below):

### Stimulate

In this section the teacher might introduce the purpose of the session to the whole class. Relevant prior learning might be reviewed and the objective of the current session in terms of the subject knowledge being developed might be explored. A learning objective relating to the quality of the students’ talk may then be identified (it may indeed have been identified following a review of the previous session), possibly with reference to the class’s ground rules. The skills and language involved in meeting this objective can be discussed and modelled; the group might like to play a ‘Get Set’ game to focus the children on the skills being developed (games that involve listening, responding or reasoning, for example). A **stimulus** for the session can then be presented; this could be a specially designed **‘talk task’** (examples are shared on the course), but could equally take the form of a maths problem, a philosophical question, a set of data to analyse, an experiment to plan, a piece of text or image to be discussed and so on.

## Explore

Now the group can discuss the stimulus together, making sure that there is a shared understanding of the task and the interesting ideas involved. Students might be given the opportunity to engage in small-group dialogue around the task. The composition of these groups is worthy of consideration. Groups of three work well as they introduce a plurality of perspectives without there being too many voices to be heard. Other factors to consider include gender and the level of prior attainment; the literacy demands of the task might also be taken into account.

## Review

In the final section the whole group might come back together to share ideas and questions emerging from the small group-work. It is during this session that the teacher might need to be most aware of the need to ensure that any differences between the students' ideas and the 'correct' ideas that he or she wishes the children to learn are noted and addressed. It is important that this doesn't become a session in which misconceptions are shared and exacerbated, but is rather one in which the students and the teacher work together to reveal flaws and inconsistencies in reasoning and discrepancies between the students' understandings and the accepted view (see 'accountability to knowledge below). Assessment is an important part of the process; dialogue is a useful way of making students' learning 'visible' and joining the dialogue enables the teacher to respond effectively to his or her students.

It is important that time is made to reflect on the quality of dialogue during this part of the session; this is where the metacognition comes in. If an objective based on the quality of talk was set, how did the group do (see the section on The Importance of Reflection)?

## Facilitation of Dialogue

### Communicative Approach

As mentioned in the introduction, teachers should employ a repertoire of talk types matched to the purpose of the activity; not all teaching should be obviously dialogic. In their 2003 book on science teaching, Scott and Mortimer offer a useful framework for thinking about the different 'communicative approaches' used by teachers. This is illustrated below:

	<i>Interactive (multiple speakers)</i>	<i>Non-interactive (single speaker)</i>
<i>Dialogic (different perspectives)</i>	A. Interactive / Dialogic	B. Non-interactive / Dialogic
<i>Authoritative (single perspective)</i>	C. Interactive / Authoritative	D. Non-interactive / Authoritative

The table identifies four communicative approaches. Approach A is dialogic and interactive – multiple speakers engage with multiple perspectives; this is the type of talk that this course is all

about, but it is not the only valuable type of talk for teaching and learning. Approach B is dialogic in the sense that multiple perspectives (including the students' previously stated points of view) are presented, but they are presented by a single speaker – probably the teacher. Approach C is interactive, but only one perspective, probably the perspective of the teacher, is being presented (the IRE routine described in the introduction is of this type). In Approach D a single perspective is presented by a single speaker – lecturing might fall into this category.

All of these communicative approaches are of value. Scott and Mortimer encourage teachers to match their approach to their teaching intention: approach D might be useful for the transmission of information and approach C for contrasting students' ideas with the accepted view, for example. The implication here is that teachers need to 'switch' their communicative approach during a learning sequence.

When making the pedagogic decision to operate in an interactive / dialogic way, a teacher is suspending his or her role as a 'transmitter' of information and creating space for the students to make meaning and to make their learning 'visible' (see the section on the educational value of dialogue). In this sense they are becoming a facilitator of the students' thinking.

### Presence and Absence

There is more to the facilitation of dialogue than might be anticipated. Perhaps the first decision to be made by the teacher-facilitator is whether to be present at all. In the presence of the teacher students can be less willing to engage in active meaning-making (often characterised by a willingness to make tentative suggestions and hypotheses) and more likely to present closed assertions that can be judged by the teacher (Barnes, 1976, p. 77). This could be used to justify the decision to allow students the opportunity to work with small groups of peers in the absence of the teacher; it seems likely that students will be more actively involved in making meaning of their learning.

When the teacher does make the decision to join the dialogue, he or she needs to be conscious of the potential impact of his or her presence; it might be useful to be explicit with the students that in this session the 'rules of the game' are changed and that the teacher is interested in the students' ideas and understandings; in a sense the teacher is positioning him or herself as part of a process of enquiry and as a learner. For a good portion of the time the teacher might choose to be absent in the sense that he or she does not seek to influence the content of the dialogue. Instead any questioning might be focused on the quality of the dialogue, allowing the facilitator to insist on rigorous thinking while leaving 'space' for the students to grapple with the content.

### Questioning Focused on the Quality of Dialogue (Socratic Questioning)

The Progress Toolkit contains a variety of questions that can be used when facilitating dialogue; these are linked to the 4Cs ground rules and skills. Examples include:

- 'Does anyone have a different point of view?'
- 'How is this connected to what X said?'
- 'Is there any evidence for that?'

- ‘X, could you say more about...?’
- ‘Would anyone like to respond to / build on what X has said?’

It might be useful for facilitators to have some of these questions in front of them during a session of dialogue as part of a ‘question plan’ so that they can practise their use (having the questions written down can reduce the burden on the facilitator’s working memory). Over time they will pass into long-term memory and become useful ‘tools’ of facilitation that can be applied in many different contexts. As the group develops, it may be that the students are explicitly taught about the questions and their purpose and encouraged to use them themselves.

### **Meaning Making**

The facilitator may also use questioning to support students to make meaning by connecting abstract ideas to lived experiences. For example, if students are grappling with an abstract idea such as ‘force’, asking for examples of forces experienced in the classroom and in everyday life may be useful. In this way students can use examples to identify common features of forces and construct a provisional definition of force, and they can check the validity of that definition by applying it to various real examples. In one such discussion in my classroom the suggestion that a force ‘makes things move’ was challenged through reflection on the students’ experiments with and everyday experiences of air resistance and friction, leading them to adopt the idea that a force ‘changes the way things move’. It is worth noting that the success of this strategy is predicated on the students having rich experiences on which to reflect!

In all of this the teacher as facilitator is seeking to deepen the collective thinking of the group and at the same time is modelling the use of questioning to deepen thinking and open-up dialogue. At some point, though, the teacher’s view of the knowledge in question needs to re-enter the dialogue.

### **Accountability to Knowledge**

One of the principles of the successful dialogic teaching approach ‘Accountable Talk’ is accountability to knowledge. In their explanation of this idea, Michaels et al (2007, p. 289) state that ‘A knowledgeable and skilled teacher is required to provide authoritative knowledge when necessary and to guide conversation toward academically correct concepts’, (they also stress the synergistic relationship between the effective acquisition of knowledge and good discourse). Alexander also acknowledges the tension between a ‘Bakhtinian commitment to dialogue as unending’ and the need to pass on accurate knowledge as it is currently understood (Alexander, 2017b, p. 6). This might involve the teacher asking more **substantive** questions that reveal the inadequacies of some of the ideas that have been offered and the superiority of others. In one discussion nine-year old pupils were divided as to whether lava cooling and forming rock was an example of freezing, the main objection being that freezing happened ‘at or below 0 °C’. The facilitator asked questions such as, ‘Do you think the liquid gold we saw earlier freezes at or below 0 °C?; ‘Does chocolate need to be below 0 °C before it becomes a solid?’ and ‘Is water the only substance that freezes?’ to challenge the misconception that had emerged. Such misconceptions and the questions that might be used to

challenge them can, to some extent, be predicted, and might form a useful part of a teacher's planning, perhaps in the form of a question plan (an example is shared in the appendices).

The teacher may decide at the end of a dialogue to go back into an exposition of the accepted version of the knowledge under discussion, perhaps stepping out of the circle to indicate the change of 'mode' of teaching. In this case it may still be useful to respond to the ideas shared by the students rather than giving an authoritative explanation that makes no reference to their ideas and perhaps thereby devalues them and disenfranchises them from the process of active meaning making. The talk would become less interactive, but would remain dialogic in the sense that the students' views are represented and valued by the teacher.

Some argue that as soon as a pre-determined end-point is introduced the talk ceases to be recognisably dialogic. One response to this might be to return to the 'bigger picture' of education as dialogue. The teacher might openly acknowledge that any conclusions reached in the discussion are provisional and will develop as the students' experience (and indeed the experience of the relevant discipline and of humanity) grows. This might encourage students to maintain a curious and questioning disposition towards the subject and to remain open to fresh perspectives. As long as the overall end-point of the education is fuller participation in dialogue, the dialogue of scientific enquiry for example, then this process of guided scaffolding can be understood as part of dialogic education.

## Evidence of the Impact of Dialogic Approaches

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has carried out research on the impact of both Robin Alexander's approach to Dialogic Teaching and Philosophy for Children (P4C). In Alexander's case a relatively short but intensive intervention led to a conclusion that, 'This trial found consistent, positive effects in English, science and maths for all children in Year 5, equivalent to about 2 months additional progress.' You can access the research here:

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/dialogic-teaching/>

This is consistent with the findings of the P4C study, which concluded that, 'Year 4 and 5 pupils doing Philosophy for Children made about two months' additional progress in Key Stage 2 maths and reading compared with other pupils.' You can access the research here:

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/philosophy-for-children/>

The University of Cambridge (2019) has published results of a project looking into the impact of dialogic interaction on attainment, concluding that children improved significantly more in maths and English when teachers...

- Achieved high levels of participation in dialogue (e.g. numerous children contribute to a whole class discussion and discuss each other's ideas)
- Encouraged children to elaborate their ideas (e.g. 'Can you explain a bit more what you mean by that?)
- Encouraged the questioning of ideas by students (e.g. 'Do you agree that Tom is right?')
- Organised group work which observing researchers judged as 'high quality'

You can access this research here:

<https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/classroomdialogue/>

## Implementation

If any new approach is to succeed you need to plan carefully for its implementation. You can download the EEF's guide to implementation at

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/guidance-reports/a-schools-guide-to-implementation/>.

Here are some simple steps that you might follow to get you started with teaching through and for dialogue in your own classroom:

- Reflect on the **communicative approaches** you use in your day-to-day-teaching. Which do you use most often? How often do you use dialogue and for what purposes is it useful?
- Consider communicative approaches when planning 'normal lessons' – identify where more dialogue might be useful and make a **discussion plan** to support you;
- Establish your **ground rules** with your class, perhaps using the 4Cs framework. Display them and start to use them as a tool for reflection;
- Plan some '**Dialogic Teaching Sessions**'. Consider using the planning frame included in the course materials and experiment with Socratic and substantive questioning;
- Reflect on your own **facilitation** of the sessions. Did you manage to engage the group in some dialogue? Was it purposeful? What went well and what might you do differently next time? Capturing some video of sessions might help;
- Keep using your ground rules to support reflection and to identify targets for improvement; think about how you can support the group to achieve them. Remember the importance of **metacognition** and self-regulation. Reviewing short film clips of your sessions with the class might help here;
- Use the **Progress Toolkit** to develop and monitor the quality of dialogue in your classroom.

If you would your school to adopt a consistent approach to teaching through and for dialogue, then do consider some **whole-school training and support**. Do contact me for advice at any time at [phillipson7@gmail.com](mailto:phillipson7@gmail.com) or on 07512033848.

## Suggestions for Further Reading and References

### Useful websites for further reading

- Robin Alexander's Dialogic Teaching: <https://www.robinalexander.org.uk/dialogic-teaching/>
- The Thinking Together project: <https://thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk/>
- Philosophy for Children: <https://www.sapere.org.uk/>
- Neil Phillipson's blog: <http://21stcenturylearners.org.uk/>
- Cambridge Educational Dialogue Research:  
<https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/research/groups/cedir/>
- Voice 21: <https://www.voice21.org/>

### Useful Books for further reading

- Dialogic Education: mastering core concepts through thinking together by Neil Phillipson and Rupert Wegerif
- Towards Dialogic Teaching: Re-thinking Classroom Talk by Robin Alexander
- Better than Best Practice: Developing Learning and Teaching Through Dialogue by Adam Lefstein and Julia Snell

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