



Dialogic teaching: orchestrating effective dialogue whole-class session

‘Dialogic teaching: orchestrating effective dialogue in whole-class sessions provides an introduction to the question ‘what is dialogic teaching?’ and highlights strategies for, and indicators of, dialogic teaching in practice.

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Our talk with students is the most important tool we have for teaching and learning. Whether or not students think and learn through talk in your classroom depends on your awareness of how you use language to interact. This brings us to the concept of *dialogic teaching*. Teachers and students, through dialogue, can work towards understanding, using and learning valuable strategies for thinking.

What is dialogic teaching?

Dialogic teaching means finding out what students think, engaging with their developing ideas and helping them to talk through misunderstandings. Dialogic teaching, as the name suggests, is the responsibility of the teacher.

By engaging students in dialogue, teachers can:

- elicit ideas;
- explain ideas;
- clarify the point and purpose of what the students will do in class;
- model or demonstrate useful ways of using language;
- help students to grasp new concepts and new ways to describe their thoughts.

The teacher's role in encouraging listening, speaking and thinking is crucial. The teacher provides stimulus by asking genuine questions and encouraging students to do the same. There is a linked flow of talk, with ideas building on one another to create a more detailed picture than any one student will have thought of alone. Points are taken up, examined and challenged. Ideas can be tentative and hypothetical, or in need of some modification.

Dialogic teaching allows teachers to have access to students' ideas (which may be deeply held or transient). During dialogue, students have an opportunity to hear and consider new information, opinions and questions. Subject learning is developed as new ideas are put forward, challenged and mulled over. It is an opportunity to develop curiosity about the thoughts of others and the capacity to reflect. Students learn that this sort of talk with other people can help them to understand and question things. They also can learn to see that there are reasons why people think differently.

Indicators of dialogic teaching

Among the significant indicators of dialogic teaching are:

- Questions are structured so as to encourage thoughtful answers.
- Answers stimulate further questions and are seen as the building blocks of a longer dialogue, rather than end points.

- The teacher chains contributions into a coherent whole, helping students to discern meaning and think of new questions.

Indicators in teacher talk

Dialogic teaching involves talk in which:

- questions are structured to provoke thoughtful answers;
- answers provoke further questions;
- exchanges are chained into coherent lines of enquiry;
- there is a balance between encouraging participation and extending understanding;
- students ask questions and provide explanations;
- turns are managed by shared routines rather than 'bidding';
- those who are not speaking are actively participating;
- the classroom is organised to encourage listening, looking, reflecting and evaluating;
- everyone speaks clearly, audibly and expressively;
- students understand the importance of the discussion;
- students have the confidence to make mistakes.

Indicators in student talk

Every student attends, and students:

- narrate;
- explain;
- instruct;
- ask different types of questions;
- receive, act and build upon answers;
- analyse and solve problems;
- speculate and imagine;
- explore and evaluate ideas;
- discuss;
- argue, reason and justify;
- negotiate.

In summary, dialogic teaching is **collective** (teachers and students address learning tasks together), **reciprocal** (teachers and students listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints), **supportive** (students articulate their ideas freely and help one another to reach common understandings), **cumulative** (ideas are chained into coherent lines of enquiry) and **purposeful** (teachers plan dialogic teaching with particular educational goals in view).

Dialogic teaching in practice

Some barriers to encouraging classroom talk can be overcome by planning, for example:



- Make explicit the ground rules that govern talk in the classroom by teaching students about the purpose of their talk with you and their classmates.
- Analyse the talk that has gone on, asking students to evaluate its quality and impact.
- Establish a talk focus and a 'thinking' atmosphere, valuing contributions, and asking questions to which you really do not know the answer.
- Discuss with students their role as listeners.
- Ask confident students to talk about their perspectives of class talk. Compare with the views of quieter learners.
- Have a 'dialogue star'. Choose a student who is expected to make the initial contribution and change every week so each learner eventually takes this role.
- Use talk partners and groups so that questions and ideas can be shared with someone, if not with everyone.

It can be useful to decide in advance how much freedom dialogic discussions in the classroom should be allowed to have. Also, time your discussions carefully – stop while you are winning. Teach the students that conclusions cannot always be reached.

Because of their impacts on learning, distractions and individual behaviour problems are a universal classroom worry. The dialogic classroom offers learners the security of knowing that their ideas are important and that their voice will be heard. In addition, class ground rules for talk mean that the whole process makes more sense. Talk which has a real point can be more interesting than the everyday distractions young learners can devise for one another.

Classroom organisation

- Where can the students sit so that they can see one another as well as possible?
- Where can you stand or sit to be visible and orchestrate the talk?
- Will moving tables and chairs create an atmosphere more suitable for talk?

Learning intentions

- Are the students aware of the learning intentions for the topic and their talk?
- Is it necessary to write out the learning intentions?
- Do students know how dialogue can help achieve learning intentions?

Your talk with the students

- Does your planning include time for you to involve the students in a dialogue with you and each other?
- Have you planned 'why', 'how', or 'what do you think' questions to help initiate dialogue?

- Are you and the class prepared to continue a line of thinking with an individual student?
- Does your class understand the importance of the extended responses?
- Are students willing to share tentative thoughts with you and one another, admitting errors and asking questions?
- Can members of the class talk to one another, examining ideas and following a line of reasoning (with you in support)?
- Do all students have the confidence, ability and motivation to speak and listen during the whole-class discussion?
- Do you use what happens during the lesson to think of some plenary questions that will help learners to think aloud, building on one another's responses?

Learner's awareness of talk for learning

- Are the ground rules that help to generate and sustain whole-class dialogue transparent to the learners, commonly talked about and open to review?
- Can the students evaluate the effectiveness of their group and whole-class talk? Do they have an understanding and vocabulary to do so, and do they know how important this is?
- Do the students understand that learning is a whole-class enterprise and that if one person is uncertain, the whole class cannot succeed unless they help?



Example strategies for Dialogic Teaching (see other resources for further inspiration)

1. Eliciting ideas in lesson introductions and conclusions

1a. Introduction recap

Context: whole-class introduction during an ongoing topic. Provide key vocabulary. Ask groups to talk together to summarise previous lesson or recall what they experienced. Each group is asked for a sentence saying what they have learned or understood; the teacher invites one group to contribute, moving round the room until all groups feel the summary of previous work is complete. At any time, the student who is speaking may ask others to contribute or comment.

1b. Lesson conclusion - reflection

Context: whole-class closing plenary. Ask groups to talk together to agree on:

- a sentence about something they learned and how they learned it;
- a question about some aspect of the work;
- something they did not understand or would like to learn more about;
- a suggestion for what they may need to revise;
- a suggestion for what they think would be interesting/useful to do next.

Invite groups to offer their ideas. Questions can be answered by other groups or individuals.

1c. Lesson conclusion - reflection

Context: whole-class dialogue session. A student who has just contributed to the whole-class discussion is asked to *nominate* the next student to speak (potentially thinking of a question for the student they have nominated). The teacher may rephrase some responses, or chain ideas, to help move things along. Nomination is a good strategy for getting away from the constraints of teacher questions and brief answers, with students bidding for turns with hands up.



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