

Boyd, Pete ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2234-3595> (2019) Developing learning and learners through dialogic teaching in higher education. In: Learning & Teaching Fest 2019, 3 July 2019, University of Cumbria, Carlisle, UK. (Unpublished)

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Dialogic teaching has **learning power** – it is an effective way to learn and to do well in assignments and exams as well as developing interpersonal and collaborative skills.

‘...we cannot persist with models of teaching as ‘knowledge transmission’, nor rely on unfocused student-centred approaches that leave the students floundering within everyday discourse.’ ‘Students need practice at participating both vicariously, as listeners and readers, and generatively, as speakers and writers, so that they can develop identities as members of the knowledge community and move from peripheral forums to more active, competent engagement with the community’s central debates.’ (Northedge, 2003a: 31).

‘The teacher, as subject expert, has three key roles to play in enabling learning: lending the capacity to participate in meaning, designing well planned excursions into unfamiliar discursive terrain and coaching students in speaking the academic discourse’ (Northedge, 2003b: 169). So introduce a key concept, create a learning activity within the field, often using narrative as a device, and then listen and use coaching to support students’ confident engagement with subject discipline discourse.

Andrew Northedge’s work is based on an ‘academic literacies’ perspective and is firmly set within higher education. Much of the literature on dialogic teaching has developed within school education and proposes practical strategies:

Robin Alexander (2017) identifies 6 characteristics of dialogic teaching - it is:

Collective: lecturers and students address learning tasks together, as a whole group

Reciprocal: lecturers and students listen to each other, share ideas and alternative views

Supportive: students articulate their ideas freely to reach shared understanding

Challenging: struggle and mistakes are welcome because we learn from them

Cumulative: lecturers and students build on their own ideas and each other’s ideas

Purposeful: lecturers identify key concepts and steer student talk to engage with them

[A] Limit teacher instruction and exposition – talk less

Lecturers use concise instructions and explanations to create plenty of time for peer talk, whole group interactive talk and especially active collaborative work on tasks. A single lecturer led instruction / exposition is normally less than 10 minutes and lecturer talk normally amounts to no more than 30 minutes in total within a two hour session. Sessions may start with an alternative ‘hook’ to get started – a problem, puzzle, picture, or quiz rather than always relying on direct lecturer explanation. A combination of buddy and whole group interactive talk engages learners with the key concept underpinning the session.

[B] Ensure engagement by all students

Lecturers use student names to distribute questions so that all students know they might be asked. The seating arrangement is designed or at least adapted to support classroom talk. Lecturers use ‘think, pair, share’ to develop buddy talk and then gather responses to build from that into whole class discussion. They use ‘keepy-uppy’ questioning to draw student into whole class discussion: ‘Mark... why does the air expand? Julie... can you add to Mark’s answer...what else happens to the air? Jemma... what do you think of that suggestion? Stephen... can you sum up the explanation they are proposing? Teachers use seating plans to learn names quickly but also may vary the pairing up of buddy students.

[C] Work towards sustained shared thinking

Lectures focus on the key concept underpinning the lesson and build on prior student knowledge. They use concrete manipulatives and other materials to provoke and shape dialogue. Question and answer is used sparingly and purposefully. Lecturers avoid too many leading questions that are seeking pre-determined

answers and sometimes invite extended student answers. They work towards 'sustained shared thinking' by using open questions, wait time and / or buddy talk, extension or recasting of student contributions, introducing new vocabulary and building on the student's interests. Lecturers aim to avoid embarrassment for wrong answers and rather use errors as a useful lever for learning. They provide diagnostic feedback and keep lines of enquiry open rather than closing them down.

[D] Task design and use of materials for 'exploratory talk'

Lecturers design sessions, including introductions, learning tasks and plenaries, that provoke 'exploratory' talk where students and lecturer: share relevant information; engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas; all actively participate; check understanding by asking questions; build on each other's responses; and strive for agreement. The lecturer carefully selects concrete manipulatives (including equipment, paper, post-its, whiteboards and technology) to provoke exploratory talk. Carefully selected textbooks or journal papers may be positioned as the 'voice' of the subject discipline.

[E] Negotiate classroom rules

Lecturers negotiate, agree and model classroom rules for 'exploratory talk' and link this to audience, purpose, and topic. Talk within sessions shifts more often from 'Ping-Pong', between the lecturer and one student, towards 'Basketball', where students are responding to, challenging and building on the ideas of their peers. Struggle and mistakes are embraced as learning opportunities. The use of the rules becomes 'how we work here'.

Ground Rules for Exploratory Talk

1. Everyone should have a chance to talk
2. Everyone's ideas should be carefully considered
3. Each member of the group should be asked:
What do you think? Why do you think that?
4. Look and listen to the person talking
5. After discussing, agree what to do (Dawes, 2010)

Effective dialogic teaching needs to combine *all* four of the following (Mercer et al., Oracy Project):

High levels of participation in dialogue - numerous students contribute

Students elaborate their ideas - 'Explain a bit more what you mean by that'

Encourage questioning of ideas by students - 'Do you agree that Tom is right?'

Organize high quality interactive classroom teaching and group work

Higher education teachers focused on student development demonstrated '...core values which were expressed in practice through an integrated pedagogical pattern (i) the development of trust, (ii) developing roles, relationships and a sense of community (iii) active confrontation and challenge and (iv) using pedagogical time and space (Messenger, 2015). This sociocultural approach avoids the either / or focus on student or learning environment.

Key References

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