

# DIALOGIC TEACHING ESSENTIALS

**Robin Alexander**  
University of Cambridge

## 1. WHAT IS DIALOGIC TEACHING?

*Dialogic teaching harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend pupils' thinking and advance their learning and understanding. It helps the teacher more precisely to diagnose pupils' needs, frame their learning tasks and assess their progress. It empowers the student for lifelong learning and active citizenship.*

*Dialogic teaching is not just any talk. It is as distinct from the question-answer and listen-tell routines of traditional teaching as it is from the casual conversation of informal discussion. Thus:*

**Dialogic teaching is *not* the 'speaking and listening' component of the teaching of national curriculum English under another name.**

- It attends as closely to the teacher's talk as to the pupil's.
- It is a comprehensive approach to talk in teaching and learning across the whole curriculum.
- It is grounded in research on the relationship between language, learning, thinking and understanding, and in observational evidence on what makes for truly effective teaching.

**Dialogic teaching is *not*, or not only 'communication skills'**

Dialogic teaching certainly aims to improve pupils' powers of communication, but it aims to do much more than that.

**Dialogic teaching is *not* a single set method of teaching.**

- Dialogic teaching is an approach and a professional outlook rather than a specific method. It requires us to rethink not just the techniques we use but also the classroom relationships we foster, the balance of power between teacher and taught and the way we conceive of knowledge.
- Dialogic teaching, like all good teaching, is grounded in **evidence** and **principles**.
- And like all good teaching it draws on a broad **repertoire** of strategies and techniques.
- The teacher draws on this repertoire in response to different educational purposes and contexts, the needs of different pupils, and the diverse character what is to be taught and learned.

## 2. DIALOGIC TEACHING REPERTOIRES

Dialogic teaching combines four repertoires:

- ***talk for everyday life***
- ***learning talk***
- ***teaching talk***
- ***classroom organisation***

The repertoires are used flexibly, on the basis of fitness for purpose, but the **principles** (see 3 below) remain constant.

### Repertoire (i): talk for everyday life

We can identify many kinds of talk which empower and support everyday human interaction. Of these, we propose that whatever else schools do, they should help children to develop, explore and use each of these:

- ***transactional talk***
- ***expository talk***
- ***interrogatory talk***
- ***exploratory talk***
- ***expressive talk***
- ***evaluative talk***

### Repertoire (ii): learning talk

In dialogic classrooms children don't just provide brief factual answers to 'test' or 'recall' questions, or merely spot the answer which they think the teacher wants to hear. Instead they learn to:

- ***narrate***
- ***explain***
- ***analyse***
- ***speculate***
- ***imagine***
- ***explore***
- ***evaluate***
- ***discuss***
- ***argue***
- ***justify***
- and they ask ***questions*** of their own.

In learning, as in life, all these forms of talk are necessary. To facilitate the different kinds of learning talk, children in dialogic classrooms also

- ***listen***
- ***think about what they hear***
- ***give others time to think***
- ***respect alternative viewpoints***

Many of the teachers in the dialogic teaching development projects have negotiated ground-rules for talk along the lines above, and these are frequently reviewed with the pupils.

### Repertoire (iii): teaching talk

In dialogic classrooms teachers may use familiar kinds of teaching talk such as:

- ***rote*** (drilling ideas, facts and routines through repetition)
- ***recitation*** (using short question/answer sequences to recall or test what is expected to be known already)
- ***instruction*** (telling children what to do and how to do it)
- ***exposition*** (imparting information and explaining things)

But in dialogic classrooms teachers don't limit themselves to these. They also use:

- ***discussion***
- ***scaffolded dialogue***.

A word on the last two:

## Discussion

- Discussion entails the open exchange of views and information in order to explore issues, test ideas and tackle problems.
- It can be led by one person (the teacher or a pupil), or it can be undertaken by the group collectively.

## Scaffolded dialogue involves

- **interactions** which encourage children to think, and to think in different ways
- **questions** which require much more than simple recall
- **answers** which are followed up and built on rather than merely received
- **feedback** which informs and leads thinking forward as well as encourages
- **contributions** which are extended rather than fragmented
- **exchanges** which chain together into coherent and deepening lines of enquiry
- **classroom organisation, climate and relationships** which make all this possible.

These forms and dynamics of talk contribute to:

- **uptake** (one person responding to and taking forward the ideas of another)
- **scaffolding** (providing the child with an appropriate linguistic and/or conceptual tool to bridge the gap between present and intended understanding)
- **handover** (successful transfer of what is to be learned and assimilation of new learning to existing knowledge and understanding)

## Teaching talk: shifting the balance

- **Rote, recitation, instruction** and **exposition** are frequently used: indeed, worldwide they are probably the default modes of teaching talk. There is always a place for them, but **discussion** and **dialogue** are less common and children need to experience them much more frequently.
- **Discussion** and **dialogue** require learners not merely to listen and answer, but also to think, engage and take decisions about their learning.
- By using discussion and dialogue we seek to empower learners both cognitively and socially, not merely to tell them things or test what they know already.

## Repertoire (iv): classroom organisation

In dialogic classrooms teachers exploit the potential of five main ways of organising interaction in order to maximise the prospects for dialogue:

- **whole class teaching**
- **group work (teacher-led)**
- **group work (pupil-led)**
- **one-to-one (teacher and pupil)**
- **one-to-one (pupil pairs)**

Again, all of these have their place: no one form of interaction on its own will suffice for the varied purposes, content and contexts of a modern curriculum.

## 3. DIALOGIC TEACHING PRINCIPLES

Whatever kinds of teaching and learning talk are on offer, and however the interaction is organised, teaching is more likely to be dialogic if it is:

- **collective**  
*Participants address learning tasks together.*

- **reciprocal**  
*Participants listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints.*
- **supportive**  
*Pupils express their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over 'wrong' answers, and they help each other to reach common understandings.*
- **cumulative**  
*Participants build on answers and other oral contributions and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and understanding.*
- **purposeful**  
*Classroom talk, though open and dialogic, is also planned and structured with specific learning goals in view.*

### Is your teaching truly dialogic? Two tests

**'If an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself, it falls out of the dialogue.'**  
(Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and other Late Essays*, University of Texas Press).

**'What ultimately counts is the extent to which teaching requires pupils to think, not just report someone else's thinking'** (adapted from Martin Nystrand *et al* (1997) *Opening Dialogue: understanding the dynamics of language and learning in the English classroom*, New York: Teachers College).

## 4. FIND OUT MORE

The above is adapted from *Towards Dialogic Teaching* (4th edition, 2008, York: Dialogos). This sets out the research evidence by which dialogic teaching is supported, discusses in detail the repertoire and principles above, and provides a framework of classroom indicators to assist both professional development and the evaluation of practice. The publication also summarises findings from the Barking & Dagenham and North Yorkshire projects and makes suggestions for further reading and professional support. To order: <http://www.robinalexander.org.uk/dialogicteaching.htm>

A summary of the approach, and exploration of the relationship between classroom dialogue and the wider dialogue about educational values and the curriculum in the context of rapid change and the uncertain future facing today's children and their world, is contained in chapters 5 and 6 of *Essays on Pedagogy* (Routledge 2008) <http://www.robinalexander.org.uk/docs/epflyer.pdf> . The book's appendix includes the full framework of justifications, principles, repertoires and indicators referred to above. This wider educational context is important: dialogic teaching raises questions about knowledge and citizenship, not to mention the nature of pedagogy, and is not merely a matter of technique.

The large-scale international comparative study, *Culture and Pedagogy* (Blackwell 2001) culminates in a cross-cultural analysis of transcribed talk from classrooms in England, France, India, Russia and the United States. This is the study in which much of the later work is grounded.  
<http://eu.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0631220518.html>

A DVD/CD pack, produced by Robin Alexander in conjunction with North Yorkshire County Council, is also available. This contains extracts from lessons in primary classrooms together with supporting material. To order *Talk for Learning: teaching and learning through dialogue* (North Yorkshire County Council in conjunction with Dialogos, 2006): <http://www.robinalexander.org.uk/dialogicteaching.htm>

By and large, the attempts by DSCF, the National Strategies and QCA to promote and explain dialogic teaching have been unhelpful. In seeking to accommodate it to their own thinking they manage to eliminate some of its most critical and powerful features. However, for a reliable recent discussion of

dialogic teaching commissioned for DCSF, see Wolfe and Alexander (2008) *Argumentation and dialogic teaching: alternative pedagogies for a changing world* – [http://www.beyondcurrenthorizons.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ch3\\_final\\_wolfealexander\\_argumentationalternativepedagogies\\_20081218.pdf](http://www.beyondcurrenthorizons.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ch3_final_wolfealexander_argumentationalternativepedagogies_20081218.pdf)

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## TOWARDS DIALOGIC TEACHING: BIBLIOGRAPHY

### **Initial analysis of classroom interaction in British classrooms (late 1980s/early 1990s) with transcript extracts, and including both electronic analysis using coded transcripts and qualitative analysis of transcripts and audiotape.**

(i) A subsidiary study from the Primary Needs Independent Evaluation Project (funded 1986-91 by Leeds City Council), using systemic observation with coded interaction categories in conjunction with qualitative analysis based on both observation and lesson transcripts from audio recordings:

- Alexander, R.J. (1995) *Versions of Primary Education*, Routledge, chapter 4, pp 103-219.

The wider project report (which covers much more than the classroom interaction study) is:

- Alexander, R.J. (1992, revised and extended edition 1997) *Policy and Practice in Primary Education: local initiative national agenda*, Routledge.

(ii) From the project Changes in Curriculum-Associated Discourse and Pedagogy in the Primary School (funded 1991-3 by the Economic and Social Research Council), using computerised discourse analysis of lesson transcripts from audio recordings, the analysis focusing on syntax, lexis, subject-matter and participants:

- Alexander, R.J., Willcocks, J. and Nelson, N. (1996) 'Discourse, pedagogy and the national curriculum: change and continuity in primary schools', *Research Papers in Education*, 11(1), 81-120.
- Alexander, R.J. (1995) *Versions of Primary Education*, Routledge, chapter 5, pp 220-269.

### **From comparative analysis of pedagogy and classroom interaction in five countries (England, France, India, Russia, United States) to the foundations of dialogic teaching, with transcript extracts.**

From the project Primary Education in Five Cultures (funded 1994-8 by the Leverhulme Trust, with additional support from the British Council and the University of Warwick). Data include videotape, still photographs, lesson transcripts, pre- and post-lesson interviews with teachers, lesson artefacts (teachers' lesson plans, lesson texts/worksheets, students' written work).

Methods for the interaction and discourse analysis combine systematic observation using pre-coded interaction categories, post-hoc quantitative treatment of the data and qualitative analysis of the discourse working from the transcripts in conjunction with the videotapes and contingent data. The interaction and discourse analyses are set within the larger framework of a comparative analysis of pedagogy as a whole.

- Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy*, Blackwell, chapters 15 and 16, pp 391-528

### **Dialogic teaching - the main texts**

These set out the theory, principles, repertoire and indicators of dialogic teaching.

- Alexander, R.J. (2008) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk* (4th edition), Dialogos
- Alexander, R.J. (2008) *Essays on Pedagogy*, Routledge, chapters 5 and 6, pp 92-153, and appendix, pp 184-191.

### Evaluation reports

From development projects involving teachers in North Yorkshire and East London, funded by North Yorkshire County Council and the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham).

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### Papers and monographs

- Alexander, R.J. (2009) 'De l'usage de parole en classe: une comparaison internationale', *Revue Internationale d'Éducation*, 50, pp 35-48.
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- Alexander R.J. (1996) 'Task, time, talk and text: signposts to effective teaching?' In NCERT (ed) *School Effectiveness and Learning Achievement at the Primary Stage: International Perspectives*, pp 78-106. New Delhi: NCERT.

### Multimedia materials

- Alexander, R.J., with North Yorkshire County Council (2006) *Talk for Learning: teaching and learning through dialogue* (CD/DVD pack with 24 lesson extracts and accompanying texts).
- Alexander R.J. with Lewis, J., MacBeath, J., Tite, S., Wolfe, S., (2004) *Talking to Learn* (CD forming part of the pack *Learning-Centred Leadership*), Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.