

Title

Developing interactive discourse in the classroom: moving beyond teachers as experts.

Abstract

In this article I describe the collaborative research undertaken by a group of high school teachers and an English adviser. The teachers were keen to find ways of breaking the teacher-dominated discourse pattern within their classrooms. They wanted to see whether, when offered a variety of teacher audiences beyond that of 'expert-examiner', students would engage in the kind of exploratory talk, described by the National Oracy Project (1992), as a feature of investigative learning. I examine the teachers' belief that discourse patterns are affected by students' understanding of contextual conditions. I illustrate the importance of students' shared understanding of collaborative discourse and discuss how their conception of learning contexts is influenced by the kinds of audiences teachers project.

Introduction

This is a report on a small research project carried out jointly by a group of English teachers and an English adviser. We wanted to consider the quality of teacher-student discourse during group work. In particular, we wanted to see how we might encourage students' to use exploratory language during group discussions. As reflective individuals, the concept of collaborative-problem solving (King & Lonquist, 1994) was appealing. We liked the idea of being both the subjects and objects of our own research (Reason, 1986). We felt that, through undertaking collaborative inquiry, we would promote our own engagement in critical thinking, restructure our existing knowledge and understandings and develop as effective practitioners. From recording, observing and reflecting on classroom practices, we hoped to gain insights that would enable us to interact more dynamically with students during group work.

The collaborative problem

Social constructivists emphasise the interrelationship between spoken language and learning. They claim that group work enables students to develop their understanding and enhance their critical thinking (Britton, 1987; Edwards & Mercer, 1987; Wells, Chang & Maher, 1990). Barnes (1992) points to the learning potential of open group discussions, which are reflective and hypothetical, where speech is tentative and exploratory and where students are prepared to take risks and to share their thoughts.

Our collective experience suggested that, although organising students into small groups may increase their potential for discourse, it does not mean they will automatically collaborate or use language exploratively to discuss and investigate issues. Evidence from longitudinal studies (Norman, 1992) and other empirical research (Cohen, 1994; Fisher, 1996; Holden, 1993; Lyle, 1993) indicates that successful peer-group work depends on students having a shared understanding of the purpose of tasks and a joint conception of what they are trying to achieve. It has been shown that similar tasks can generate very different student responses in terms of the quality of talk and collaboration that emerges (Crook, 1991; Jones & Mercer, 1993). Some studies provide examples of how students' interpretations of the ground rules may differ in important ways from those of their peers and/or teachers. (Mercer, Edwards & Maybin, 1988; Rohrkemper, 1985). For example, while some students working in reading groups may see it as an opportunity to work collaboratively, others, in the same group, may see it as an opportunity to exhibit individual knowledge and superiority.

There is evidence that when teachers bring ground rules for discussion into the open it can lead to improved motivation and levels of performance amongst students (Prentice, 1991; Dawes, Fisher & Mercer, 1992/95). However, a substantial body of research shows this practice to be uncommon and that students usually receive little help in understanding and appreciating the ground rules they are expected to follow during group discussion tasks (Elbers & Kelderman, 1994; Hull, 1985; Mercer & Edwards, 1981). It seems that, without such awareness, students' traditional

conceptions of school learning contexts and acceptable discourse patterns inhibit their capacity for collaborative discussion.

Classroom studies have consistently revealed how teachers occupy the dominant role of *expert* or holder of knowledge. Within this sequence the teacher *Initiates* the discourse with a question, the student *Responds* with an answer and the teacher provides *Feedback* in the form of an *Evaluation*. The predominance of this pattern, and the tendency of teachers to make the first and third moves, led to the suggestion that it is the (I-R-E) exchange which makes classroom discourse so distinctive (Dillon, 1982; Goffman, 1981; Hargreaves, 1984; Mehan, 1979; Wood & Wood, 1988; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Young, 1984).

In the following example, taken from our data, the students' answers are characteristically short as they attempt to guess what the teacher has in mind.

- 1 Teacher So what do we know about Tom Oakley
- 2 Student He likes kids
- 3 Teacher No we don't know that from what we've read
- 4 Student He's rude to everybody and nobody likes him much
- 5 Teacher Well...he doesn't like to be pestered...but he lives all alone...so...
- 6 Student He's old and grumpy...a miserable old man
- 7 Teacher Well...yes...he's miserable because he lives all alone and...he's....
- 8 Student He's lonely
- 9 Teacher Yes that's right he's lonely isn't he

When a student's response is well outside the teacher's acceptable parameters she evaluates with an emphatic 'no' (line 3). If the answer is a little closer to what she will accept, she provides feedback in the form of a prompt (line 5), or by providing a starter for the students to complete (line 7). When the answer is acceptable the teacher provides a positive evaluation (line 9).

The collaborative inquiry

Cazden (1988:134) suggests that: 'The only context in which children can reverse interactional roles with the same intellectual content, giving directions as well as following them, and asking questions as well as answering them, is with their peers.' We were unhappy with this conclusion, which seems to suggest that teachers' presence in student groups will invariably inhibit, rather than facilitate, productive discourse. The view appears to be based on the assumption that a teacher is restricted to a single role of 'didactic expert', able to project only one audience: that of critical evaluator. Central to our investigation, therefore, was the notion of *audience* and the premise that teachers have the capacity to offer students a wide and valid range of different audiences within the classroom. We were influenced by the seminal work of Britton, Martin, Mcleod & Rosen, (1975) who, in discussing students' writing, assert that it is possible for teachers to interact with students in a variety of roles and to project a range of audiences beyond that of expert-examiner. Underpinning our work in school, therefore, was the feeling that by responding to students in a variety of ways, we may be able to:

- develop a repertoire of teaching roles;
- extend the range of audiences available to students;
- allow students to assume a sense of ownership over their learning;
- encourage students to identify, explore and discuss issues.

Our research approach was influenced by the work of Saez & Carretero (1996) who synthesised the case studies of a number of teachers and developed descriptive narrative events into a collective analysis. We wanted our inquiry to be a 'genuine attempt to understand actions from the actors point of view, rather than 'just a matter of grasping objects from an external standpoint' (Kerdeman, 1997). We wanted the

experience to be critical and emancipatory, but also informative for other professional colleagues beyond the research group. An initial methodological concern therefore, was whether to adopt the high ground or immerse ourselves in the swamp (Cordingley, 1999). We decided to occupy both types of terrain. We felt that through a collective analysis of our individual experiences and interpretations, we might emerge with, at least, the bones of an audience model, which we could then share with colleagues and which would act as an explicit framework to inform future practice and further inquiry.

The research group included 5 teachers of English working in 5 comprehensive schools. Two schools were located in urban industrial areas, two in semi-rural areas and one in an inner city. The urban schools had approximately 10% ethnic groups, the semi-rural schools 5% and the inner city school 25%. All students in the inquiry used English as their first language. The schools organised year groups into classes according to attainment (as determined by achievement in school and national tests). Students across the attainment range took part in the inquiry. The teachers valued collaborative learning and group work formed an integral and important part of their teaching approach. Their normal practice was to organise students into small groups of approximately 3-6. Unless a task specifically required selection to be made, on the grounds of gender, ability or interests, students were allowed to work in friendship groups.

‘In collaborative approaches to practitioner research, the quality of the relationship between researcher and practitioner is crucial to the research enterprise’ (Brooker & Macpherson, 1999). My role, as an external researcher, was observer/video technician, transcriber and fellow analyst (Cook-Gumperz, Gumperz & Simons, 1981). I visited each school at least once a week for a month. This period was used to develop effective working relationships with the teachers and students. During this time informal video recordings of group discussions were made and re-played to the

students. After this familiarisation period students and teachers were video recorded as they worked on group tasks in English lessons. All groups were recorded within the total classroom setting and clarity of recording for transcription purposes was achieved through the use of either tie microphones or a pressure zone microphone. Approximately 20 hours of videotape was gathered.

Retrospective analysis (Circourel, 1974) was undertaken and recordings were re-played to the students. During informal interviews students were asked to discuss their feelings about the nature of tasks, the degree of teacher direction and control, and their belief about teacher's expectations. Video recordings were transcribed, annotated and returned to teachers and students for their comments so that, on each occasion, the teacher, students and I collaborated to undertake a detailed analysis. This procedure enabled us to evaluate the discourse patterns of students and teachers during group discussions. Teachers felt that students' use of *exploratory language* and *reasoned evaluation* was the most significant feature of successful group discussion. *Desultory talk* (random exchanges which contribute little to the task in hand) and *disputational talk* (where participants simply disagree and do not enter into constructive dialogue), were seen as main features of unsuccessful interaction. In addition to qualitative evaluation, a text analysis concordancer was used to identify salient linguistic features of the students' talk and to compare different transcripts (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997). For example, qualitative analysis revealed the use of linguistic markers, such as, 'I was wondering', 'It could be', 'I reckon', 'what if', 'but suppose', 'don't you think', as features of exploratory talk. A computerised search for such key features therefore, provided a further means of comparing transcripts.

The outcome

One teacher (Sue) deliberately chose to focus on work with 14 year-old students who were exhibiting learning difficulties in many curriculum areas. The problems included short attention span, an apparent inability to focus on given tasks, poor personal organisation, a lack of self-control and a propensity to seek the teacher's attention. This group was felt by many members of staff to be non-co-operative, non-productive and unruly. The generally agreed strategy of staff was to keep the students as busy as possible with carefully structured worksheets. Sue approached the task with some trepidation and various self-doubts crept in.

Sue comments:

I thought, what if I lost control of the class and a riot situation broke out? My credibility and reputation would be in shreds. Would they learn anything at all? Talking does not produce a tangible written outcome does it? What if the students are so used to seeing me as the expert they see anything else as weakness?

This was a concern shared by all members of the research group and, in one meeting, the teachers depicted their 'nightmare visions' in graphic form.

insert Figure 1 here (cartoon drawing of nightmare vision)

Despite this, Sue says:

I took a deep breath and put all these worries aside. I was hoping that the students would learn more effectively with less direct 'expert' teacher intervention.

The class was organised into small groups and each given a different poem to discuss. The students' task was to read through the poem and record their thoughts on a communal piece of paper. The activity was carouselled so that, after approximately twenty minutes, each group passed on its notes and poem to another group. The task became increasingly difficult as groups received more comprehensive, and potentially confusing, sets of notes.

Sue observed:

I did have to intervene occasionally. Sometimes they needed steering in the right direction, sometimes they needed encouragement. I needed to push some of the ones who were content to let others do all the work. Although I found it difficult to totally avoid being the teacher as expert, I did discover that through careful intervention I could kick-start discussion. For example the following students are discussing *My Mother saw a Dancing Bear* by Charles Causley.

Teacher Well, if someone's eyes are aching what could it mean

Andrew It's tired

Samantha It's tired of working and showing off to the children

Teacher Yes...it's tired of the life it leads...what do you think the bear might want to do

George Escape...to the woods

Teacher Is there a contrast between the snow and the forests and where the bear is now...they wouldn't have such thick fur if they were meant to live in a hot country would they

As a result of this intervention the students become more confident

George It says here the owner kept a bar to hit Bruin with in case he didn't perform...so where do you think he's performing now

Sue now leaves the group.

Samantha A hotel

George So he's performing well

Samantha On the streets

Simon It's a school...it's outside a school

Samantha It's in chains...outside a school

George The school gate...in June

Samantha Yeah...'cos it's so hot

George That's why his coat is burning

Sue comments:

It might be argued that students are so used to teachers being in this role of expert that they have difficulty in seeing them in any other way. In observing and reflecting on my classroom practice, I hope to discover ways of breaking this student expectation and dependence. It is not easy: I have to try and work out when it is appropriate for me to intervene and when it is best to stay away.

Avoiding imposition

In the following extract the teacher (Steve) is working with a group of 15 year-old students who are discussing the poem *Dulce et Decorum Est* by Wilfred Owen. Steve wants the students to explore and to question the poem's form and possible meanings. However, he does not want to impose his own 'authorised' interpretation upon them.

- Nina (reading the poem) 'Towards our distant rest'...
- Louise Instead of retreating we thought they were going to die...we thought they were walking into death...turning their backs on life and the only thing they are thinking of is death
- Teacher That's incredible...I'd never thought of that
- Louise That's what we think
- Kate They won't have any rest in the war...like the only rest they are going to get now is when they die
- Louise And they are walking into it
- Nina Just trudging along
- Teacher I think lots of men had that view...just a question of time
- Nina Like they are walking along all curled up like tramps...coughing
- Kate I love that verse where he can't get his mask on...'stumbling...'fumbling'
- Louise He's got his mask on and he can't see it all
- Debbie Yeah...he can't do anything to help him...if he did he'd die
- Nina I think it's good in Latin at the end because if it was in English you'd just read it straight away

Steve comments.

I know this poem well and I have my own interpretations but this can be a problem rather than a help. I want them (the students) to interpret Owen's words and to make their own meanings. What I've tried to do is to take part in the

discussion and to give my views but not to impose them. I want my views to be taken seriously but not accepted without question. It is not easy.

Teacher as a peer

When oral assessment first became a part of GCSE (General Certificate in Secondary Education) examinations, many teachers suggested that accurate evidence of pupils' attainment was difficult to obtain because teachers' presence inhibited and distorted group discussion. The teachers, in this study, wanted to see whether it was possible for them to engage in discussion with students and be treated as peers. This audience proved to be the most elusive and the most difficult role to adopt. However, one teacher persisted and found that, on occasions, she was able to take part in a discussion and be treated as an equal. The following extract shows the teacher (Gail) discussing the issue of nuclear power with a student. Dominic, aged 16, is working on a piece of persuasive writing and Gail feels that he may benefit from discussing his thoughts with someone who holds an opposing viewpoint.

Gail comments:

It would have been easy to arrange for Dominic to discuss the matter with other students, but this seemed like an ideal opportunity to see whether I could interact with a student, not as the holder of superior knowledge and status, but as someone who holds equally valid views and has an equal right to express them. Implicit in this notion, of course, is that I have to accept that my views are also open to evaluation and criticism.

Dominic Well what about Cornwall...I mean there's a lot of leukaemia in
Cornwall

Teacher Yeah but there's also a high incidence of...of...I've forgotten the name of
the gas that comes up

Dominic radon

Teacher That's right...radon and that's also associated with leukaemia so again you're getting off the point...the fact remains that Sellafield is a leukaemia hotspot

Dominic It's not...it's been proved it's not a hotspot...it's been scientifically proved

Teacher So you're telling me that what British Nuclear Fuels says is to be believed and what Greenpeace says is not to be believed

Dominic Well Greenpeace have fouled up in the past

Teacher Well yeah...but British Nuclear Fuels have covered up in the past...the government's in favour of nuclear power

Dominic Yes but it doesn't own BNFL like it used to

Teacher It as good as owns it and you damn well know it

Dominic Well it's a PLC

Approximately five minutes later.

Teacher Do you seriously think that Greenpeace have falsified information

Dominic Yeah 'cos they were against nuclear power

Teacher If you follow that logic...because BNF are for nuclear power doesn't that mean that they've falsified information too

Dominic Yeah well...there's a bit of propaganda on both sides really

Teacher Well...OK...there's still a lot of research to be done isn't there about wind and wave power

Dominic And lying...there's quite a lot of lying going on

Teacher Like when

Dominic There was on the same programme as Sellafield...they were talking about renewable energy sources and they were saying that four wind turbines were equal to a nuclear power station and that's a load of lies

Teacher Well I haven't got the facts so I don't know that

Dominic Wouldn't it be more of an upheaval to have say somewhere the size of Scotland covered in wind turbines just to produce enough electricity for say Birmingham

Teacher Well I'd sooner have wind turbines all over the place than I would pollute the atmosphere

Dominic Or are we using more of the earth's resources to build these windmills...'cos they're massive things if you haven't seen them

Teacher I don't know...yes they are massive and I have seen them...you're sort of implying that I'm a real Luddite or something

Dominic You are

Gail comments

This was not an easy role to adopt. It only works if there is a shared understanding and some kind of mutual respect that has been built up over time. Dominic had to know that it was not just a game: that I really did mean what I said, but he also needed to know that he could reject what I said and to give back as good as he got, and he did didn't he! I think it was useful because I challenged him in a way that maybe his peers, especially friends, won't. High ability students like Dominic need a critical, informed audience, but one they can respond to openly as well.

Fluidity: moving in and out of different roles

In the following extract the teacher (Julie) is working with 14-15 year olds who have read the Anne Fine novel, *The Granny Project*. In the book, reference is made to soap operas that Granny likes to watch. The class is organised into small groups and the task is to discuss and identify salient features of soap operas.

Julie comments:

Watching television seems to be a part of teenage culture and they were certainly experts in the field. As the teacher, I found myself changing role and offering different audiences throughout the lesson, depending on the extent to which groups had taken control of the task.

In the following example Julie is invited to evaluate the group's ideas.

Jillian We think that Daphne might be Angela's best friend and Angela's told Daphne the thing...and she's pregnant with Tom...and Daphne's told Marcus

Louise Daphne's always liked Marcus so she wants to split them up so she tells him

Teacher Right...right so you're working your story line out

Julie does not remain long in this role. She quickly becomes a group member and offers her own ideas. One student focuses the group's attention on the importance of a note.

Ben The note...Daphne found it...who she gives it to actually changes the story line

Steven I was wondering what could be on the note

Ben Could be anything

Teacher There's more intrigue mentioned with that note

Sally It could be something to do with at the beginning where it said that Marcus and Angela are getting married and Tom wanted to marry Angela

Teacher Because it's obviously going to cause some problems isn't it...that note...it's going to cause problems

Emma Has Angela seen the note

- Teacher We don't know do we really...that's what we've got to decide...to work into the next episode
- Emma It'd be better if she hadn't seen the note wouldn't it and didn't know anything about it really
- Teacher If she hadn't found it then there's a greater possibility of somebody else finding it
- Emma Yes because she wouldn't have left it under the haystack to blow into the field or lane if she had would she...she would've got rid of it

Julie comments:

On occasions students used me to sound out ideas. Sometimes I facilitated proceedings by directing, guiding or providing essential information. At other times I might be included in the discussion as a working group member. The activity brought to my attention the crucial significance of the role assumed by the teacher. This cannot be predicted in advance because the very nature of talk is unpredictable. As teachers we have to be receptive and sensitive to the needs of the students. We need to recognise which teaching role will be most beneficial to them as learners by taking cues from them. It is not easy. It is demanding and only improves with practice.

Some final reflections

[Gail]

I realised that classroom organisation is not the answer: that putting kids into groups, giving them a task and saying, 'Here, what do you make of that?' is not enabling them to take control of their own learning. They take ownership of an activity, whatever the classroom organisation, when they perceive that you are offering an appropriate audience for their work at that point in the learning process, and when I say appropriate I mean appropriate to their needs, not mine, though of course, if our perceptions of audience are the same then our needs will be the same anyway.

[Sue]

Moving out of the expert role is not easy. In fact it is quite frightening, especially if you are working with kids you know are not easy to manage at the best of times. Your natural response is to keep things tight - keep a lid on things - be authoritarian. But moving out of that role, however difficult it is at first can have an effect on how the students work. You can actually see them begin to respond to work more positively when they realise that you don't have all the answers - that you have some respect for what they have to say.

[Steve]

The way they spoke - the ideas they had - the kinds of issues they explored - they would never have done any of that before when I joined the group because they would have seen me as the expert and automatically looked to me for the answers, so my presence would have immediately put a damper on any discussion or debate.

[Julie]

I think I provided a range of audiences and found that even those students who tended to be reluctant to speak in class felt able to contribute to discussion. They were allowed the space and relative freedom from constant teacher intervention to mentally wrestle with issues and formulate ideas. I found myself working with students in an on-going learning situation: helping, guiding, offering my own knowledge and expertise when this was requested or required.

Students' changing awareness of collaborative discourse

Barnes (1992) makes the point that whatever teachers plan to teach it is always the students who have to do the learning. This struck a very definite chord with us and seemed to epitomise our research issue. Although all the teachers in the inquiry valued group discussion and demonstrated this through the arrangement of furniture in their classrooms and in the choice and organisation of tasks, it was clear that many students either did not see discussion as a valid and useful academic activity. They did not understand its purpose and were unsure about their roles and responsibilities during group work. This view became evident when teachers initially discussed the issue with students. In the following interview-transcript students indicate their resistance to working collaboratively.

Stuart But why...like...what's the point...I mean in an exam right...I can't ask
 Robbie or Jed what they think can I...I mean

Jed They'd say you was cheating

Stuart Yeah...say it was cheating and disqualify you so what's the point

Robbie And yeah...I know it sounds mean and that but...you know...like I want to get
 the best mark I can but if I tell somebody else they'll get the same mark as me
 won't they and that's not fair

The notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) is clearly in evidence here. The students' preference for independent learning indicates their notion of knowledge as something that is an individually accrued personal asset. This privatised perception of knowledge was a common phenomenon amongst students and was advocated in the teaching of most curriculum subjects, as the following interview-transcript shows.

- Rashmi We only work like this (in groups) in English really
- Abi Sometimes we do in geog
- Rashmi And geography yeah and RE but only for bits
- Shabina We just take notes and copy from books mostly...in science and maths and that
- Rashmi Right...and then we have to learn stuff for homework and...
- Abi We have a test...we have tests to test if we've learned it
- Rashmi And then you're told what position you are

The concept of independent learning for individual achievement appeared to be reinforced by students' parents, as the following interview transcript illustrates.

- Shabina So on parents' night...OK...if you haven't done well they say like...oh our Shabina you need to do better than that
- Abi Yeah and you'll have to start staying in
- Shabina If you don't get better than below average you won't get to university
- Rashmi Yeah they always say about going to university don't they

The students concern was clearly related to personal achievement and learning was seen as a 'product'. It became clear that in order to develop successful group work we would have to demonstrate that collaborative learning was an effective 'process', which could enhance individual output. We introduced a number of group tasks and on completion asked the students to reflect on the process of learning and to:

- identify particular aspects of collaborative learning that had helped them as individuals;
- identify aspects of collaborative learning that had inhibited their individual learning;
- evaluate what they had each learned as an individual;
- evaluate what they had learned as a group.

Engaging students in activity designed to help them see the value of group work proved to be highly effective, as illustrated by the following interview-transcript.

- Nina It's good I think 'cos I would never have thought about a lot of things on my own
- Chanese Well you think about them but in a different way
- Raj Yeah and its like...when you hear what other people think right...its like oh yeah I never thought of that or...
- Nina Or you think that's not right...you don't agree but then if they say like...why not you have to think about it or you look stupid...as though you don't know what you're talking about
- Raj Yeah like when Chanese asked me why I thought that poem (Not Waving but Drowning by Stevie Smith) wasn't about drowning...like drowning in water I had to really think about it so's I could explain what I meant
- Chanese But it doesn't mean you have to agree does it...'cos I don't really agree with you about that
- Raj Yeah but then you have to tell me why you don't agree don't you and that makes you think as well

The extract shows how the students' perceptions of collaborative learning began to change. They were beginning to see the value of group interaction and understand the

potential of discourse in furthering their individual understandings. They have recognised that learning can occur through creative conflict as different perspectives are exchanged.

Developing a shared understanding of collaborative learning

One of the main findings of our inquiry is that a shared understanding between students and between teachers and students is a crucial factor in determining successful group interaction. Teachers organised ‘discussion forums’ where students viewed and evaluated audio and video recordings taken of them as they worked in small groups. From initial evaluations, students drew up ground rules for collaborative learning. They identified generic salient points, which formed charters for governing interaction in small group discussions. Students generally decided that everyone should:

- contribute to discussion if possible;
- listen to and value all contributions;
- not dominate discussion;
- challenge and evaluate contributions but never deride them;
- share ideas and help others to elaborate on ideas;
- try to justify opinions and discuss, not argue, by giving reasons to support views;
- never humiliate anyone or make them feel stupid for making a contribution.

The explicit identification of expectations, roles and responsibilities and the forming of charters had a significant impact on the way students interacted in discussions. Their raised awareness of the social and cognitive demands of collaborative discourse became very apparent during subsequent forums, when they viewed and evaluated themselves at work. In the following transcript, students are discussing a video recording taken of one group working on a task in a geography lesson.

Elliot That was good how Mel asked Jonty to explain what he meant

Teresa Yeah right...didn't just say like...that's rubbish and that

Elliot Right...yeah and Jonty could couldn't he...he did explain what he meant

The students have recognised the importance of making socially supportive moves in order to develop cognitive aspects of a discussion.

Mel Yeah and Jonty knows lots about Macdonalds and globalisation...I mean...blimey...well he does doesn't he...but like...he listens to what everybody else says doesn't he...even if they don't know as much as him

Raj What I thought was good...right...was how everybody wanted to have a say but everybody listened as well...to everybody else

Although social cohesion and the feeling that no-one should be humiliated is strong, students recognise the need to challenge and seek justification for statements or viewpoints.

Samina When Claire said that malnutrition was a big problem and so they needed big companies...for jobs and building roads and that...Jonty didn't agree

Raj Yeah but...no he didn't...but he said why not

Samina That's what I was going to say...and all the others listened to him but they listened to Claire as well and then they said things what they thought

During discussion forums students reflected on the quality of their interaction and displayed an increased awareness of the discourse skills involved in collaborative learning. This metacognition shaped students' perspectives and helped them to develop a shared understanding of what it meant to participate as an individual within a co-operative group.

Developing a shared understanding of the teacher's role in collaborative learning

We felt that Britton's (1975) model of teacher-audiences was drawn from the teacher's perspective. We were anxious to develop a broad range of audiences which students recognised and perceived to be effective for them at particular stages in the learning process. When we began the work, students' predominant notion of the teacher's role was that of expert / evaluator. The following transcript is taken from a whole class discussion and exemplifies the students' view.

- Teacher So how do you see me as your teacher then...what's my job
- Ailsa To teach us
- Teacher Yes but how do you think I should teach you
- Samantha By giving us things to do
- George Telling us things
- Rashmi Asking us questions
- Teacher Shouldn't you be telling me things and asking each other questions...what makes you think that I have all the answers?
- Ailsa 'Cos that's your job

Moving students from this very specific and somewhat entrenched position and getting them to recognise teachers in a variety of roles appeared, at first, to be a daunting task. However, as with the development of other aspects of group work, we found that students responded positively when teachers' roles and expectations were discussed openly and honestly and were made explicit. Video recordings made of group work where teachers had interacted with students in various ways were re-played to students and teaching roles discussed. In the following transcript a teacher is discussing her role with the class.

- Teacher Do you still think it's my job just to tell you things
- Alec Not just tell us things

Teacher What else then...what else do you think I ought to do to help you learn

Debbie Well...right...sometimes instead of telling us you make us think

Steve You get us to ask each other things...like explain what we mean.

Teacher And do you find that useful

Students Yeah (general agreement)

Marcia But sometimes...like when we were arguing and nobody was listening you
sort of took over more then

Teacher Did you resent that...when I did that or what

Steve No 'cos we'd usually lost it

Alec We needed you to be like referee or something

The most difficult role for students to understand and accept was that of the teacher as a group member.

Teacher What about when I took part in discussions and gave my own
opinions...how did that make you feel

Barry That's weird

Leon Embarrassing

Teacher Why weird...why was it embarrassing

Samina Because teachers don't do that

Adrian It isn't normal is it...you know us saying exactly what we think

Raj Yeah that we think what you've said is rubbish...well not rubbish but
we don't agree with you

However, once students had overcome their initial aversion this particular teacher role became one that was valued highly by students.

Marcia It's like having a proper discussion

Shabina Not being treated like a child

Leon It's good because you feel like you're being treated as an adult
Teacher So you don't find it weird or embarrassing any more then
Students No

From such discussions and analysis of video recordings students we were able to see that teaching and learning is more complex than they had initially envisaged. Most importantly, they came to recognise and value a diversity of roles beyond that of teacher as expert/evaluator.

Implications for policy and practice

Through lively discussion and as a result of classroom observation and analysis of video recordings we were able to develop our understanding of teacher-student discourse. Our collaborative research indicated that, when expertise is dispersed in the classroom a wide range of roles and relationships becomes possible.

insert Figure 2 here (teacher roles)

Analysis of 40 recordings indicated that exploratory language would develop more readily, if teachers created open contextual contexts and these were, subsequently, perceived as such by students (figure 3).

insert Figure 3 here (distribution of utterances)

It is clear, from figure 3, that when students perceived teachers in a non-examiner role, their discourse was characterised by exploratory exchanges, supported by reasoned evaluations. To encourage this kind of dynamic interaction, teachers developed open questioning techniques. They applied strategies such as making statements rather than asking questions, diverting questions or answers from one student to another, remaining silent and resisting the urge to direct and inform. They found that, by applying the

following strategies, they were able to elicit more extensive and educationally productive responses from students.

Discussion was *initiated* through:

challenging	'I'm not sure that you have enough evidence to say that.'
directing	'If you look at the title it might suggest something to you.'
enquiring	'How do you think you'll go about doing that?'
inviting	'Would you like to tell me about how you did that?'
stating	'That was difficult to write.'
suggesting	'It might be a good idea to look in the index.'
modelling	'I'm not sure but what I might want to ask myself is...'
listening and encouraging	'That sounds really interesting....go on.'

Discussion was *developed* through:

appraising and praising	'That would make sense, good thinking.'
encouraging exploration	'You might take that argument even further.'
focusing / orienting	'So consider what your next step might be.'
helping the students to reflect	'Let's just think about what we've discussed.'
offering hypotheses	'Suppose you applied that principle to another situation.'
providing information	'Yes what you're talking about is called foregrounding.'
relating to own experience	'I felt exactly the same way about that.'
relating to the student's experience	'Didn't you find that Austen had a similar style.'
seeking clarification	'I'm not entirely clear about what you're saying.'
urging amplification	'I'd like to know a little more about that.'

One teacher evaluates the knowledge gained from the inquiry and comments on the value of identifying specific audiences.

[Dave]

Successful teachers have a fairly wide repertoire in the way that they deal with students and they don't deal with all students or all situations in the same way. I think the main thing the work has done for us is to allow us to move from an implicit, intuitive understanding of that, to an explicit theory, where we have attempted to draw out an audience model. We have identified what some of these roles might be and we have found that very useful for our own teaching.

Conclusion

Our observations and reflections helped us to understand that exploratory language is used most frequently when students hold a shared understanding of contextual conditions, and when this corporate perspective places a higher value on the cognitive process (investigation and interrogation) than the managerial product (finding correct answers). When students perceived a task as having open contextual conditions, their discourse was characterised by tentative exploration and propositional extension. Their learning was enhanced as they identified problems and issues, ordered and developed their thoughts, monitored their own progress, displayed tolerance of others' views and practised turn taking in the discussion process. The students' perception of the teachers in a supportive non-evaluative role, helped them to develop the kind of 'climate of reciprocity' noted by Howe (1990). In such a climate, the students not only considered and evaluated material presented to them, they:

- formulated questions for themselves;
- used exploratory language and exchanged diverse and often, conflicting ideas;
- exercised self-regulation;
- displayed self-determination and a desire to persevere with a task.

However, our inquiry reinforced the view that simply organising students in small groups does not mean they will automatically adopt a propositional style of speech or engage in collaborative discourse. As McMahon & Goatley, (1995, p 24) suggest, changes in instructional material are important but, 'the oral discourse patterns prevalent in many classrooms also need modification.' Willes (1983) and Hughes & Westgate (1988) illustrate how children learn to accept a teacher dominated discourse pattern from a very early age. Other research (Hardman & Beverton, 1993; Hertz-Larazowitz, 1990) indicates that unless teachers are very explicit in establishing the ground rules, students tend to assume that normal rules of product-assessment apply.

We found that the activity, which leads into group discussions, is especially important. It is at the phase of introducing group tasks, when students' expectations and understandings of contextual conditions are confirmed. We certainly discovered that, unless we emphasised the importance of collaborative discussion, there was correspondingly less chance of students exploring issues and engaging in critical dialogue. Classroom research has, for some time, recognised the significance of students' contextual perceptions and expectations about their roles as learners (Westgate & Corden, 1993; Weisz & Cameron, 1985). Because of their familiarity with didactic teaching styles, students tend to resist new ways of interacting and often fail to engage in dynamic discourse during group discussions. However, we found that when students perceived a task as having open contextual conditions, they were able to overcome inhibitions formed through previous expectations and preconceived ideas about the required output. As a research group, we concluded that creating the circumstances where discussion can flourish involves more than organising classrooms into small groups. Collaborative discourse must be seen as a complex task, involving discussion between students and teachers of the ground rules which are to apply and of students' own perceptions of their roles, learning tasks and teachers' expectations.

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Learning Phase	Use of Language	Appropriate Teaching Roles
		(may be)
Engaging with new information - experiencing new stimuli	Recalling Recounting Connecting	Expert Announcer Director Manager Negotiator Conductor
Exploration of new information - interaction of stimuli with existing knowledge / understanding	Exploring Expounding Questioning Speculating Hypothesizing	Facilitator Provider Collaborator Arbitrator Chairperson Learner
Reshaping existing knowledge / understanding	Arguing Challenging Reasoning Justifying	Counsellor Scaffolder
Overt representation of new learning	Explaining Narrating	Evaluator Critic
Reflection and self analysis	Evaluating	Consolidator Confidant

Figure 2. Appropriate teacher roles.

Figure 1. Teachers' nightmare visions.

Distribution of utterances when students perceived teachers in non-expert-examiner roles.				Distribution of utterances when students perceived teachers in an expert-examiner role.				Distribution of utterances when students did not have a shared understanding of teachers' roles.			
exploratory	reasoned evaluation	disputational	desultory	exploratory	reasoned evaluation	disputational	desultory	exploratory	reasoned evaluation	disputational	desultory
49	92	30	17	14	39	35	41	38	49	58	31
42	88	23	7	21	46	15	27	53	30	65	14
33	84	20	11	19	45	40	46	42	39	47	39
51	107	37	13	10	52	31	60	35	38	43	39
37	96	34	10	11	46	45	39	46	64	67	30
40	92	41	17	9	42	28	49				
32	99	29	18	16	32	29	37				
48	113	25	7	17	31	34	52				
58	136	64	21	8	52	26	38				
61	95	37	17	20	44	14	36				
43	93	32	6	21	33	27	42				
46	124	56	22								
38	102	57	17								
35	97	49	25								
42	101	50	16								
35	91	36	8								
30	89	32	11								
31	84	15	16								
55	103	28	13								
42	89	18	12								
40	106	53	20								
46	105	50	21								
38	102	39	33								
39	104	45	22								

Figure 3. Distribution of utterances in 40 videotaped group discussions.

Distribution of utterances when students perceived teachers in non-expert-examiner roles.				Distribution of utterances when students perceived teachers in an expert-examiner role.				Distribution of utterances when students did not have a shared understanding of teachers' roles.			
exploratory	reasoned evaluation	disputational	desultory	exploratory	reasoned evaluation	disputational	desultory	exploratory	reasoned evaluation	disputational	desultory
49	92	30	17	14	39	35	41	38	49	58	31
42	88	23	7	21	46	15	27	53	30	65	14
33	84	20	11	19	45	40	46	42	39	47	39
51	107	37	13	10	52	31	60	35	38	43	39
37	96	34	10	11	46	45	39	46	64	67	30
40	92	41	17	9	42	28	49				
32	99	29	18	16	32	29	37				
48	113	25	7	17	31	34	52				
58	136	64	21	8	52	26	38				
61	95	37	17	20	44	14	36				
43	93	32	6	21	33	27	42				
46	124	56	22								
38	102	57	17								
35	97	49	25								
42	101	50	16								
35	91	36	8								
30	89	32	11								
31	84	15	16								
55	103	28	13								
42	89	18	12								
40	106	53	20								
46	105	50	21								
38	102	39	33								
39	104	45	22								

Figure 3. Distribution of utterances in 40 videotaped group discussions.

