



Speaking Frankly – The case for oracy in the curriculum

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ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION  
discovering voices



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The English-Speaking Union is a unique global educational charity and membership organisation that believes in the power of spoken communication. Through our educational programmes, competitions, cultural exchanges and advocacy we provide people with the skills to realise their full potential, helping them become confident communicators, critical thinkers and empowered citizens. We believe that good communication is essential to individual, community and cross-cultural development and understanding, and endeavour to ensure it is recognised as such.



In 2012, School 21 in Stratford, East London, opened its doors. Recognising the value of developing students' speaking skills to support them in learning and in life, the school places speech at the heart of every lesson and nurtures a whole-school culture of oracy. Teachers and students have found that this talk-centred approach has a pronounced effect on achievement across the curriculum as well as enhancing pupils' eloquence, confidence and wellbeing.

In 2014, supported by the Education Endowment Fund, the School 21 Trust worked with Cambridge University to develop an oracy curriculum and assessment tools to be shared with schools across the country. With the backing of the Big Change Charitable Trust, Voice 21 was born.

Now that we are confident that prioritising oracy has a transformational effect on students we want to spread our ideas in order to bring about change.

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## DUNCAN PARTRIDGE

### Director of Education, English-Speaking Union

Duncan Partridge is Director of Education at the English-Speaking Union. Prior to taking up this role, he enjoyed a career in education that took him all over the world. Roles included: Headships at St George's College, Argentina; International School of Milan, Italy; and Halcyon London International School, UK; as well as curriculum leadership roles at Newton College, Peru and Maseru English Medium Prep School, Lesotho. Duncan has also acted as an education consultant, working with international schools and globally mobile families. In the 1990s, he founded a successful theatre-in-education company, which toured London primary schools.

**This publication is a collection of essays by teachers, academics and educational thinkers on the importance of oracy in education. The voices here come from diverse backgrounds and present a range of perspectives but all of them share an understanding of how vital it is for schools to pay attention to the explicit development of speaking and listening skills in their students.**

The history of oracy in education in this country over the last 40 years can easily be characterised as a period of 'shouting into a void'. Throughout this time, various initiatives have sought to promote an understanding of the importance of oracy, both as an area of learning and as a tool for learning. Despite this, in the same era, successive policy developments have had the impact of effectively downgrading speaking and listening in terms of state-defined educational priorities.

In 1975, the government-commissioned Bullock Report, called for all schools to have an organised policy for language across the curriculum, which would include reference to speaking and listening skills. The National Oracy Project in the 1980s built on these recommendations

by providing support and guidance to teachers seeking to develop oral communication skills in their students. However, the new National Curriculum, when it was introduced at around the same time, was widely criticised for not being sophisticated enough in its outlining of oracy skills and also for the fact that such skills were only associated with the English Language curriculum.

In 2014, a revised National Curriculum apparently sidelined oracy skills even further by making reference to them only through broad generic guidelines associated with each key stage. This situation was exacerbated when speaking and listening was removed from GCSE English assessments and replaced by a stand-alone 'Spoken Language Endorsement', which had no impact on a student's final GCSE grade.

It would be easy for those of us who believe passionately in the importance of oracy in education to become despondent at these developments. However, to the contrary, there is every reason to be optimistic that speaking and listening skills will, in the future months and



**'In order to tap into this wealth of experience and expertise in speaking and listening, the English-Speaking Union and Voice 21, two organisations which share a passionate belief in the importance of this area of education, have established a platform for collaboration which will enable teachers, schools and other educational bodies to share support and reinforce each other's work'**

years, be given greater prominence in our schools. Many schools and educational organisations around the country, recognising the vital importance of oracy skills, are responding by developing their own programmes, resources, skills frameworks and other tools specifically designed to improve young people's proficiency in this area. Moreover, this is being done in such a way as to correct a commonly held misconception that tended to equate oracy with 'woolly, progressive' educational ideas. Rigorous and evidence-based practice is central to many of the projects being developed and implemented.

Some examples of the great work being done are outlined in this publication but there are many more out there. In order to tap into this wealth of experience and expertise in speaking and listening, the English-Speaking Union and Voice 21, two organisations which share a passionate belief in the importance of this area of education, have established a platform for collaboration which, it is hoped, will enable teachers, schools and other educational bodies, to share support and reinforce each other's work. This 'Oracy Network' ([oracynetwork.org](http://oracynetwork.org)) is just part of a growing movement, which is seeking to 'redress the balance' in the curriculum and to encourage a greater focus on what is, after all, the main currency of human interaction, the spoken word and the way we interact with it.

There is every reason to be optimistic that speaking and listening skills will be given greater prominence in our schools





## BECCY EARNSHAW

Director of Voice 21

Beccy Earnshaw is Director of Voice 21, which campaigns for the teaching of speaking skills in all state schools, and provides support to educators on all things oracy, based on the work of School 21. Beccy was previously Director of Schools NorthEast (a network of 1,200 schools in the North-East). Before she entered the education sector,

Beccy worked for The Children's Commissioner for England, The Electoral Commission, The Hansard Society and BBC Parliament.

## START TALKING AT THE BACK... MIDDLE AND FRONT OF CLASS

It is an average morning at School 21. Like their peers in schools across the country, students are in assembly, but this is not your standard assembly. There is no monologue from the front whilst students shuffle in their seats, eyes glazed, listening in stony silence. Instead the 150 pupils in the room have organised into circles and are in the midst of discussing the difference between reaction and response. Using familiar and established talk protocols, they ensure they all get the opportunity to speak. Teachers walk around the room listening and at times asking probing and clarifying questions to deepen students' thinking. On the screen, sentence stems prompt pupils to engage with the contributions of their classmates and give reasons for their views, whilst a list of target vocabulary highlights higher-level language for students to select and use. The facilitator raises their hand and a hush descends. Then, without being targeted, cajoled or compelled, individual students volunteer to share the thoughts of their group, comfortably and confidently addressing the large room.

Walk the corridors of the school and from maths to drama you will hear the buzz of lively and purposeful discussion. Look at the timetable and you will see Oracy take its place alongside maths, English, the arts and science on the curriculum. In the classrooms you'll hear teachers – and other students – giving specific feedback on students' speaking skills. And on the walls, displays outline the school's expectations for talk and posters reinforce the six attributes the school believes are essential for success: craftsmanship, spark, professionalism, grit, expertise and, crucially, eloquence.

Unlike most school leaders, the founders of School 21, an all-through state comprehensive in Stratford, East London, had the opportunity to start their school from scratch; to design into its DNA the pedagogies and approaches they felt would make the biggest impact on students' success. They chose to put oracy, a focus on speaking skills and spoken language, at the centre of the school as one of three core practices that would underpin all aspects of its curriculum, culture and community.

From the beginning, School 21 gave speaking an equal status to reading and writing in school. Oracy is present across all subjects and settings, challenging teachers to get students in class to talk in purposeful and meaningful ways, to model good speaking and listening in their practice, track their pupils' progress in speaking skills and value and celebrate the spoken word.

The aim is for students to find their voice physically and metaphorically. Through this focus on spoken language, children and young people at School 21 learn how to express themselves and communicate clearly. They become able to explain ideas and emotions to other people, not only in a school setting but in their lives outside the classroom too. They develop the skills to listen effectively, discuss and respond with meaning, and debate and disagree agreeably. They gain the confidence, self-belief and courage to speak in public and share their thoughts, intellect and creativity with the world.

Whilst there appears to be a general consensus that speaking skills are important in principle to students' success beyond school, there are several barriers obstructing oracy in gaining the status it deserves alongside literacy and numeracy at the core of the curriculum. The lack of currency in the qualifications system, the challenges of assessing oracy, and the pressures to meet external accountability targets have meant that the teaching of spoken language falls into the worthy but peripheral, 'nice to have' category.

In turn, teacher perceptions of the difficulties in managing behaviour in talk-based lessons, misguided school policies on written evidence of learning, teachers' confidence in modelling good oracy, and a concern that some children are too shy/disruptive/dominant/quiet to respond to oracy teaching in a constructive way, also play a part.

As a result, schools devote hundreds of hours of teaching time and teacher expertise to the development of pupils' writing skills but barely any time is spent developing the vital verbal communications skills we all need to succeed in work, our social life and relationships, and to contribute to society as active citizens.

Pupils' oracy skills are too often left to chance. Classroom talk is an unstructured break in a lesson rather than a fundamental and integral part of teaching and learning. Students are rarely given feedback on the quality of their verbal contributions; teachers don't plan the purpose of a discussion item; and neither pupil nor teacher has a consistent view as to what 'good talk' looks, sounds and feels like. Speaking and listening gets scant coverage in the national curriculum and unlike reading, teachers have no commonly understood indicator or guide to identifying students' spoken language skills. Students' speaking skills are therefore generally judged by subjective criteria created by individual teachers, or not at all.

Recognising the need for shared expectations for talk that could be understood by teachers and students alike and be used for planning and assessment, School 21 worked with Professor Neil Mercer and his team at Cambridge University to explore the different components of

oracy and spoken language. What emerged was a framework comprising four strands of oracy – the linguistic, physical, cognitive and social and emotional. This framework provides the infrastructure for teaching oracy across School 21, enabling teachers to have specific, meaningful formative conversations about students' spoken language skills across subjects and over time.

**The first step in embedding oracy into your classroom is accepting that it already happens – your students talk a lot, and you can leverage that. You start from the idea that talking isn't an extra thing. It's children discussing ideas with each other and coming up with their own conclusions. Talk supports thinking, and that means it supports learning.**

Amy Gaunt, Primary Teacher and Oracy lead, School 21

In primary settings, pupil talk is a part of everyday learning – circle time, pair work and immersive projects encourage children to speak and share their thoughts and ideas. However, teachers rarely talk about 'talk' to enable pupils to understand what makes a good discussion or conversation, or track specific elements of the development of talk beyond the foundation stages. The explicit planning and intentional guiding and organising of pupils' talk (such as scaffolding discussions and giving them talking guidelines and roles) builds confidence, a sense of worth, embeds understanding and increases learning.

In secondary schools, oracy is less prevalent. Some schools invest significant effort into stopping children from talking, equating the quietness of lessons as a proxy for learning. A study from 2005 found that in the average secondary school in a disadvantaged community, students spoke approximately four words a lesson, equating to just over two hours of purposeful classroom talk across their secondary school career.

Some students may have natural ability and confidence as speakers, others benefit from the modelling of eloquence and opportunities to become practised in discussion techniques around the dinner table in their homes. For many, however, the lack of any explicit, consistent and sustained development of their speaking skills in schools means they are denied education in this crucial skill.

As spoken language lacks status within our over-dominant qualifications and accountability system, oracy is at risk of being perceived as a peripheral rather than core part of the curriculum, side-lined to extra-curricular time, such as debate club or one-off initiatives such as a class assembly. As a result, instruction and practice

in oracy becomes the preserve of a self-selecting few, exacerbating inequality and gaps in confidence and achievement.

Schools need to make the teaching of oracy ordinary for every child and young person. Regardless of their background, attainment or interest, students should be supported to find their voice, confidence and poise as these attributes unlock higher levels of learning, access to employment and the social and civic involvement that underpins wellbeing and happiness.

At School 21 students get specific timetabled oracy lessons in Year 7 based on a curriculum designed to enable them to first discover their voice and then to use it to make a difference in the world. The dedicated oracy curriculum super-charges students at the start of secondary school, helping them to master protocols and techniques to support their learning across all areas of the curriculum and beyond. These oracy lessons, delivered by specialist teachers, signal the status of oracy within the school and help level the playing field for students with differing exposure to talk-based activities in their primary education.

**“A strong focus on oracy, the ability to talk fluently and accurately and express ideas, develops pupils’ confidence, self-esteem and communication skills. It also strengthens the quality of teaching. This makes a significant contribution to the high standards that all pupils achieve.”**

Ofsted report on School 21, June 2014

Well-planned, purposeful classroom talk supports the development of competencies which are vital to learning in all subject areas such as the ability to:

- Analyse and solve problems
- Receive, act and build upon answers
- Speculate and imagine
- Explore and evaluate ideas

It does a disservice to students if oracy-based pedagogies are limited to their traditional domain of English and performing arts.

School 21’s ethos is based on the expectation that teachers should enhance oracy through their teaching regardless of their subject and that all teaching can be enhanced by oracy regardless of the subject. Maths and science teachers are as passionate about the power of oracy as drama or modern foreign languages departments. Their enthusiasm for incorporating oracy in their lessons is not because it makes them fun, engaging or dynamic (although it does), but because it works.

Small but significant changes can be made in classrooms to inject more speaking and listening into lessons – such as the taking of registers or the banning of one-word answers to encourage extended responses to teacher questions. But for oracy to be embraced by all teachers and for all pupils to benefit from the advantages of learning through talk and learning how to talk, schools need to consider whether their culture and key practices consistently promote spoken language.

Ask yourself how does my school provide opportunities for modelling good talk or giving students platforms from which to speak across and throughout the school day?

For example, changing assemblies from a lecture to a discussion forum format elevates the prominence of speaking and listening, enables students to get used to presenting to a large audience and provides a showcase to model oracy teaching techniques to educators in the school.

Parents’ evenings can be reimagined so they no longer involve a conversation between adults at which the young person is absent or mute. Instead, students present a story of their learning to be questioned and critiqued by teacher and parent – not only giving the parent a much richer picture of their child’s performance at school, but also ensuring the student is accountable for their effort and given agency within their learning.

The layout of classrooms too can be altered and furniture can be designed to facilitate student discussion and interaction and displays across the school can emphasise the expectations of speaking and listening.

School leaders can reinforce the importance of oracy through their marking and feedback policies to empower teachers to create high quality talk-based learning without the burden of generating meaningless written evidence to ‘show’ that the learning happened.

Students can be challenged to lead Harkness discussions, debates and socratic seminars to move past memorisation and regurgitation to deep consideration of the subject, metacognition and higher-order and independent thinking.

Progress in oracy can be assessed, tracked and measured so that teachers can respond to pupils’ needs in their teaching and interventions. Employers, parents, professionals and other children and young people can be brought into school to create new audiences and contexts for talk; and work experience, school visits, staff interviews and open days can be explicitly exploited to enable students to practise their speaking skills in ‘real world settings’. These experiences challenge students to consider their tone and register, the appropriateness of their language and their presence and poise in unfamiliar settings.

And schools can also create set-piece events that celebrate

speaking as highlights of the school calendar and seminal moments in students' school experience. At School 21, all students from Year 7 perform 'Ignite' speeches, presented without notes to an audience.

Each of these innovations will serve to enhance teaching and learning, increase the quantity and quality of speaking and listening and create a culture and ethos that instils the view that talk matters.

**“You don't know how good your oracy is until you're put into a different context and are asked to do something with it. Imagine the contexts we put our children in: in front of their parents in the first year, in front of undergraduates in their second year, in front of political experts in their third year, and in front of employers in their fourth year. They have the acuity, agility, and ability to frame their speech depending on the audience, which is often the missing link in speaking.”**

Oli de Botton, a School 21 co-founder and head teacher

Oracy was vital in the first classrooms (many of the techniques used to promote classroom talk are adopted from Socrates and Aristotle) and it is just as relevant and vital in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century classroom. As technological advances enable the automation of so many of the skills that are prized today, it is that which makes us human that will maintain and grow in value in an uncertain tomorrow.

If we are truly committed to empowering every young person regardless of their background with the belief that their voice has value and that they have the ability to articulate their thoughts so others will listen; if we want independent critical thinkers who can collaborate and co-create across contexts; if we are going to foster civic engagement in our increasingly fragmented society and spark democratic participation amongst a generation of young people detached from our formal institutions; then it is time to get talking in class.



From the beginning, School 21 has given speaking an equal status to reading and writing in school



### DR FIONA PIENAAR

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## ORACY AND WELL-BEING

Mental health and well-being have been described as 'fundamental to our collective and individual ability as humans to think, emote, interact with each other, earn a living and enjoy life' (WHO, 2016). The ability to listen and to speak are critical components in the development and maintenance of mental health and well-being. While we know that the ability to be comfortable in one's own company, to be alone (as against loneliness), is an equally significant aspect of mental health and well-being, this needs to be balanced out with an individual's connection to, and communication with others – a sense of belonging, of being heard and of being understood. To have one's opinion invited, considered and valued.

In fact, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) highlights in at least two of the Articles, the oracy privileges that all children (defined as below the age of 18) should enjoy, including ensuring that those who are 'capable of forming their own views be given the right to express those views freely...and that they be given due weight' (Article 12 – *Respect for the views of the Child*, UNCRC, 1989), and that each child should 'have the right to freedom of expression, including freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds', including orally (Article 13 – *Freedom of Expression*, UNCRC, 1989).

From the very beginning of a child's life we are aware of the significance of language and listening and the connection of these skills to well-being. From the moment a child takes their first breath, when they have no ability to convey their thoughts, their needs and their emotions through spoken language, it is the listening skills and the language of their primary caregivers and their ability to 'mentalise', to approximate what their child needs, and to respond appropriately, that starts to set the course for the development of a child's mental health and well-being. The ability of parents and caregivers to 'listen to, and speak for' their child is crucial for the development of secure attachment. Even when children have not yet developed language, if they feel listened to and understood by their primary caregivers, they experience what it is to have their communications received and responded to and this, the basis of attachment, gives them a crucial start to life and the sense of well-being associated with mental health.

As children mature, so their oracy skills develop and much of this is dependent on the quality of the modelling they receive in their primary environment. Without a sound base of language development and the ability to communicate and to listen, children start school at a distinct disadvantage, both academically and socially. Without the ability to

communicate and to listen to others, they are more likely to experience challenges in both the classroom and the playground. Too often we see children and young people withdrawing into themselves, anxious, acting out, struggling with their well-being because they are unable to articulate the difficulties they are experiencing in their lives and do not know how to reach out and connect with others. They might have an underdeveloped emotional vocabulary which may well result in them battling to communicate and connect with their peers, resulting in them

feeling isolated and perhaps unable to ask for help. When children and young people cannot express themselves verbally they may resort to attempting to communicate through their behaviours, either externalising (loud, aggressive, physical) or internalising (withdrawn, low mood), or a combination. With these sorts of behaviours children and young people may be misdiagnosed with conduct disorders and mental ill health (Lanz, cited in Communication Coalition, 2010) rather than the actual underlying issues of speech, language and communication needs. In fact, we know that nationally the most common disabilities in childhood are related to speech, language

and communication, affecting up to 10% of young children in society. Not surprisingly there is a strong connection between mental health challenges and oracy skills and a correlation between children with untreated speech, language and communication needs and mental illness (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 2012). Studies have also shown that where permanent school exclusions are concerned many of the young people who are at risk have language and communication difficulties (Clegg et al, 2009).

When Place2Be ([place2be.org.uk](http://place2be.org.uk)) sets up a mental health and emotional well-being project with a partner school, one of our primary motivations is to help children and young people develop the coping skills that underpin resilience. Skills such as acquiring and utilising an emotional vocabulary, learning to manage and articulate thoughts, the ability to listen and respond to others appropriately (advancing empathy), to develop the confidence to put forward a point of view,

to argue, to discuss – these are all skills that can last a lifetime and are all contingent on oracy. However, where children and young people are concerned, probably one of the most critical skills that underpins mental health and well-being is the confidence and ability to ask for help and to have a clear awareness as to who to turn to for that support. While many teachers might feel unqualified to offer this assistance, ‘training and consultation in developing affective and communication skills to support children and young people who display challenging behaviours and mental health challenges’ has been identified as a ‘beneficial school-based approach’ (Cole, 2015, p.10).

In general, mentally healthy schools have a focus on well-being oracy and encourage open discussion and debate about the fact that, just as we all have physical health, we also all have mental health. Every child and young person should feel secure in the fact that they attend a school where they are able to speak up about their well-being or about challenges to their mental health and to feel that they will be listened to and that there will be an appropriate response. Generally, if there is a culture of passion and esteem for oracy in a school then conversations about well-being are more likely to be encouraged and respected.

If children have a less than positive start in life with primary caregivers who do not have the ability to listen to, interpret and articulate their non-verbal communication cues – skills that contribute enormously to secure attachment and well-being, they may start life at a distinct disadvantage, potentially on a pathway of challenging mental health due to their inability to connect with and communicate with others. Lack of conscious support with language development may mean they then start school not only with poor attachment, but with a limited vocabulary and an inability to listen to and connect with others. When conceptualising the state of well-being for children and young people, the World Health Organisation places a particular emphasis on developmental aspects such as having a ‘positive sense of identity, the ability to manage thoughts and emotions, as well as to build social relationships, and the aptitude to learn and to acquire education, ultimately enabling their full participation in society’ (2013). Speaking and listening play a major role in each of those aspects of well-being.

A major consideration regarding oracy and well-being today is the added challenge of identity and communication on social media that children and young people might grapple with. The younger generation, those who have access to the Internet, are often described as ‘digital natives’, growing up with the capacity to communicate and socialise online. While there are various ways in which we try to attach emotion and other cues to digital communications – such as via



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emoticons, photographs, and punctuation – the nuances of the spoken language can easily be missed and communications misinterpreted when the vehicle is a digital device and the language is often stripped back to a bare minimum. This is, however, the world and the method of communication and information that children are born into today and rather than only focusing on how we can decrease the impact of the digital world, which will continue to advance, we should also be ensuring that the opportunity to develop oracy skills is always available, valued, planned for, and celebrated in every school. In this way we may



‘Two of the most powerful life skills that we can teach our children and young people are the confidence and the ability to speak up on their own behalf and the ability to listen and speak up on behalf of others. Not all children are provided with the opportunities to develop these skills before they start their formal education. Let’s ensure that we offer them these opportunities in school’

ensure a balance between digital communication skills and oracy skills.

School may be the last opportunity to help children and young people develop oracy skills to the standard that is sufficient for them to ‘realise their own abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and make a contribution to their community’ (WHO, 2014). Not all children come to school with the ability to listen and to speak at an age-appropriate level. In addition, in the global village and multi-cultural world in which we live today, many children do not have the benefit of being educated in their first language. Unless we give oracy and its connection to well-being the

recognition and attention it should have in education, we will continue to have children and young people who are likely to develop speech, language and communication difficulties, display challenging behaviours in their efforts to be understood and, in some cases, embark on a trajectory of lifelong mental health and well-being challenges. The fact that research indicates that over 60% of young offenders have difficulties with speech, language and communications (Bryan et al, cited in Communication Coalition, 2010) should alert us to the urgency of the situation. School should be viewed as the ideal environment in which to provide children and young people with the opportunities to develop an awareness of their capacity to listen consciously and to promote confidence in their ability to speak publicly. These skills are some of the most significant roots of lifelong well-being.

We know that ‘many mental health conditions in adulthood show

their first signs in childhood and, if left untreated, can develop into conditions which need regular care’ (Lamb, 2015, p.3). Two of the most powerful life skills that we can teach our children and young people are the confidence and the ability to speak up on their own behalf and the ability to listen and speak up on behalf of others. Not all children are provided with the opportunities to develop these skills before they start their formal education. Let’s ensure that we offer them these opportunities in school. The connection between oracy and well-being is crucial and while there are many other risk factors that can impact on a child and young person’s well-being, oracy is one that we can turn into a protective factor. Society literally cannot afford to ignore the potential impact of young people facing a lifetime of challenges to their mental health and emotional well-being.

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## DEVELOPING ORACY IN THE EARLY YEARS THROUGH SUSTAINED SHARED THINKING

We might take for granted the ability to speak fluently and to understand what other people are saying to us, but of course we are born without any language at all. In the first few years of life we make sense of, and learn to speak, the beginnings of an entire language (or perhaps even two or more languages, if we are brought up in a multi-lingual environment). As well as learning individual words and understanding what they mean, we develop an understanding of the grammar of our native tongue as well. Amazingly, we learn to do all this simply by listening to, mimicking and communicating with the people around us. A newborn baby will cry until her needs are met, but by around three months old she will begin to babble and to make sounds back when someone talks to her. At around a year old, she will start to use whole words correctly and by the age of two, she might know and understand fifty or more single words. By the time she is four or five years old, she may have learned upwards of a thousand words, and be able to speak in a grammatically correct way, most of the time.

Oracy is a crucial part of the early child development that takes place during the Early Years Foundation Stage (the period from birth to five years old). It is only once we have learned to speak that we can express our ideas, needs, feelings and wishes, and communicate effectively with those around us. Depending on the type and quality of the early oral input children receive, they can start their statutory education with a wide difference in the range of their vocabulary and the level of their speaking and listening skills. Those children who have less language at the start of their schooling may struggle to access learning later on. Rowe notes how 'Research documents a clear relation between socio-economic status (SES), particularly parent education and family income, and children's vocabulary development.' Early language development is clearly a key factor in any attempts to close the educational gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds.

It is important to remember that the Foundation Stage is not a statutory phase of education. The focus during this time is not only on education; it is also on childcare. While some children may attend an early years setting for only a few hours a week during term times, other babies and children may be in full day care from morning to evening, five days a week, perhaps 48 weeks a year. The play-based pedagogy that is used by settings during the first five years is not just about the

most effective methods for learning, it is also about a child's right to relax and play. Play offers a very rich variety of experiences during which oracy can develop. It is through play that children learn the language of socialisation, of turn-taking, of sharing, of counting, of the objects that surround them. Play helps children understand symbolic communication – a stick becomes a sword, a ride-on toy becomes a tractor, a shell becomes a precious piece of treasure.

The concept that one thing can stand for another is a precursor for children's later understanding of how the symbolic systems of writing and numbers work.

One of the key ways that the early years practitioner can help children develop their language skills and thinking, when interacting with them during their play, is by using a technique known as 'sustained shared thinking' to create a language-rich environment. Sustained shared thinking is included in the Teachers Standards (Early Years) (2013) as a critical factor contributing to good progress and outcomes for children, and as an excellent technique for extending children's learning and thinking.

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education PPE Project

(2004) also noted that 'the quality of adult-child verbal interactions' was crucial in early learning, and that 'more "sustained shared thinking" was observed in settings where children made the most progress.' Siraj-Blatchford gives a useful definition of what sustained shared thinking looks like in practice. She describes it as:

An episode in which two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative, etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend the understanding.

If you were to try and identify a pedagogical technique that was the polar opposite to direct instruction in a teacher-led classroom, you would probably alight on something that looked a lot like sustained shared thinking. Sustained shared thinking is about the sharing of power, as well as the sharing of ideas – it is a form of co-construction in which the child's thoughts, ideas and opinions are treated with the

utmost respect. The practitioner acts less as a 'teacher' and more as a 'conversationalist'. It is a child-initiated interaction, in which the child and the practitioner learn together. You cannot 'plan for' or 'direct' sustained shared thinking, because it arises out of a spontaneous and interested interaction between a practitioner and the children.

However, one way in which the practitioner can encourage sustained shared thinking is to enhance the environment, so that it enables and encourages learning through discussion to take place. The resources that the practitioner offers to the children will relate to their interests or the next steps in learning, to ensure engagement. The practitioner might also use a challenge or provocation of some kind, to encourage high-quality talking and thinking to take place.

There are a number of benefits of using sustained shared thinking, particularly around emerging oracy. The technique helps to create a sense of engagement, encourages the development of a wide vocabulary, and gives the practitioner a better understanding of the child. It supports children in thinking about and making sense of their world, and in learning how to talk about their own thinking – the important process known as metacognition. Through their shared conversation, and through the sensitive use of open questions, the practitioner understands more about how the child is learning at the moment, and what the next steps are for further development. This approach makes learning more visible – to watch a child completely absorbed in a conversation with an adult is to watch a deep level of learning at work. The innate sense of curiosity with which we are all born, is enhanced and developed through talking together as partners.

The first step in an episode of sustained shared thinking is for the practitioner to tune in to what the child is saying – to learn to listen and observe properly. Rather than jumping in and trying to guide or take over the play, it is typically best for the practitioner to stand to one side for a while, to see what is going on. The practitioner needs to show an interest, extending and developing the talk by asking questions or making observations, but not 'taking over' or trying to lead children to a 'correct answer'. The practitioner must wait, watch and ask sensitive questions at just the right moments. This approach needs time, commitment and sensitivity to work – it is not about the adult imposing or transmitting knowledge to the child, it is about encouraging wonder, curiosity and exploration. The adult must be warm, responsive to the children's needs, building self-confidence and scaffolding the children's thinking.

A recent study into effective pedagogy in the early years demonstrates how it can be harder than we might think to use the open-ended questions that are a feature of sustained shared thinking.



'Sustained shared thinking needs time, commitment and sensitivity to work – it is not about the adult imposing or transmitting knowledge to the child, it is about encouraging wonder, curiosity and exploration. The adult must be warm, responsive to the children's needs, building self-confidence and scaffolding the children's thinking'

The study looked a sample of questions observed in settings and found that 34.1% of questions asked were closed ones. While closed questions serve an important purpose, for instance to check that a child understands a particular piece of knowledge, or is paying attention, they are less useful for developing oracy, because they tend to encourage one-word answers. The very richness of sustained shared thinking as a technique comes out of its use of open ended discussion to explore the child's thoughts.

When sustained shared thinking is working as it should, the children do not get distracted by anything around them – they become completely absorbed in what they are doing, and in their conversations about it. The children might speculate, play around with ideas or facts, develop their opinions, or expand and extend their ideas. They might investigate the world around them, and come to a conclusion or a consensus about what they think. At its best, sustained shared thinking creates the kind of high-quality experiences that lead to the development of early language, and of oracy. It is a technique that has much to offer other phases of education, particularly in the way that it respects and listens to the child's voice. Sustained shared thinking is far more than the passing of knowledge from a teacher expert to a child novice; it is a partnership of talk from which everyone involved in the conversation learns.

#### Notes

- 1 [education.umd.edu/HDQM/labs/Rowe/LDPL/Publications\\_files/Rowe\\_JCL\\_2008.pdf](http://education.umd.edu/HDQM/labs/Rowe/LDPL/Publications_files/Rowe_JCL_2008.pdf)
- 2 [unicef.org/crc/files/Rights\\_overview.pdf](http://unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf)
- 3 [gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-teachers-standards](http://gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-teachers-standards)
- 4 [eprints.ioe.ac.uk/5309/1/sylva2004EPPEfinal.pdf](http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/5309/1/sylva2004EPPEfinal.pdf)
- 5 Siraj-Blatchford, *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years*, 2002
- 6 Siraj-Blatchford, I, Sylva, K, Muttock, S, Gilden, R and Bell, D *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years*, Institute of Education, University of London

Sustained shared thinking involves the practitioner showing an interest, extending and developing the talk by asking questions or making observations





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## THE CENTRAL IMPORTANCE OF ORACY IN THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM

The final report of the Cambridge Primary Review (2010) emphasized the vital importance of building spoken language skills. The link between thinking and language provides an imperative for developing every child's capacity to express and develop ideas through talk. When I first became headteacher at The Wroxham School I was keen that our community should become known as a 'listening school'. Many years later, having studied Robin Alexander's work on dialogic teaching (2008) I realise that creating a school with dialogue at the heart is probably the most powerful means of building and sustaining high-quality learning (Peacock, 2016).

### The importance of story

From the earliest days in nursery, in our school, children are encouraged to tell the story of their play. They may simply tell the ongoing narrative of their play as it develops, or enact a known story using props. The influential work of Pie Corbett on 'talk for writing' has helped teachers in many schools to recognise the crucial importance of talking as a means of building and developing thinking prior to any form of writing. In our Year 1 class recently, one of our tortoises went missing. The teacher used this as an opportunity to ask the children to speculate why Flo had left the classroom and where she had gone. The children discussed with each other their own suggestions of Flo's adventures and as a class they debated what she had done on her travels. This led to each child authoring an illustrated story about Flo the tortoise. When she returned, they read their stories to her, delighted that she had come home.

### Democratic circle meetings

A formal means of emphasising the importance of dialogue is exemplified through the democratic circle meetings that we hold each week on a Tuesday for fifteen minutes instead of holding an assembly. These meetings are facilitated by children in Year 6 and are attended by a mixed age group of children from Year 1 upwards, as well as by teaching staff. The aim is to provide a meaningful forum for everyone in the school to debate issues of interest, collective concern and reflection. Children in Years 1-5 know that they will eventually become the leaders of circle meetings and enjoy their journey through school in preparation for this experience. The circle meetings provide an opportunity for everyone to listen to the views of others and to recognize that solutions are almost always better achieved when achieved through consensus and debate.

Most recently, children used the forum of circle meetings to share picture book stories that they had written. As a staff team we were interested in ways that literature can build empathy and the mixed age forum enabled us to gain insight into the ideas and empathic responses that the children's own stories engendered. Further information about this approach can be found in Sanders (2011) and Brown et al (2012).

### Mathematical reasoning

Within mathematics we are increasingly placing emphasis on the importance of high expectations of every child to explain their thinking. Maths lessons at Wroxham, influenced by the teaching observed by our colleagues when visiting Shanghai, now contain far more opportunities for children to discuss their calculations or problem solving with learning partners or with the whole class. Children at Wroxham are not placed in groups according to 'ability' and will have the opportunity to work with every child in the class throughout the year. Learning partners are randomly chosen at the beginning of the week and during maths lessons there will be structured rapid opportunities for the partners to discuss their approach to a calculation or mathematical task. In some cases children who may be less confident about mathematics are able to rehearse and refine their thinking with a peer. This serves to strengthen and deepen the metacognitive process of both children thereby building capacity for mathematical reasoning. Technical language is used from the earliest days.

### Self-assessment and review

Throughout the school our expectation is that children will become active participants in learning and will set the bar high for their future achievements. We encourage notions of 'personal best' instead of sharing comparative grades, as we believe notions of fixed ability set limits (Hart et al 2004, Swann et al 2012). Decision-making about choice of task, choice of seating, whether or not to join an adult for additional tuition or support, are examples of ways that intrinsic motivation is encouraged within a climate of trust. This form of learning environment encourages agency and fosters the expectation that choices will be informed and that children will be able and highly motivated to explain their learning decisions. Visitors comment on the remarkable capacity our children have to talk about their progress and to describe in detail how they aim to improve still further. Targets are not set by the teacher, but children self-assess against shared criteria and record their own 'next steps' at the back of their books as an aide-memoir.

Family consultations are superseded in Years 5 & 6 by Learning Review meetings. These are fifteen-minute appointments attended by the child, her parents, the class teacher and headteacher. Each meeting is prepared in advance by the child with a maximum of four PowerPoint slides outlining current challenges and successes across the curriculum. The child leads the meeting by talking about her learning, responding to feedback and questions from the adults. Every child attending is able to engage fully with the meeting as they are being encouraged to talk about their own challenges within learning, rather than trying to guess what the adults may wish them to say.

### Oracy in history

Storytelling is a key means of conveying historical knowledge and understanding. To facilitate this, we have built a mock Celtic roundhouse in the school grounds. The roundhouse is big enough for a whole class to sit around the fire-pit to share stories. The walls are decorated with Celtic symbols painted by the children using natural dyes. Each year the oldest class learn Celtic myths that they then pass onto the other children via the oral tradition of storytelling. The new Year 6 children become keepers of the myths.

Humanities topics may be evaluated through setting up an exhibition or museum to which visitors are invited from throughout the school and community. Children are keen to explain the knowledge they have acquired to their guests, or to showcase their work such as models they have made. The act of explaining what has been learnt embeds and extends understanding. Additionally, in some classes learning may be summarised through a dramatic presentation or through writing a screenplay and making a film. On one occasion, films were made in partnership with students in Years 10 and 11 from a local university technical college. The final versions were proudly shown at a film premiere for children and their families in the specialist school studio theatre.

### Language for nurture

We have a refurbished double-decker bus in our playground that has a library downstairs and a large carpeted space upstairs that we use for a lunchtime nurture group and for weekly art therapy sessions. We recognise the importance of developing relationships through dialogue, especially where the child has experienced some form of trauma. Enabling children to express their feelings and to talk for sustained periods with a trusted adult is essential. Our capacity to fund art therapy sessions has enabled us to avoid any form of exclusion from school in the past 12 years.

### Language for learning

Building a love of language as a means of expression is at the heart of any rich primary curriculum. Children enjoy the rhythm and cadences of language even if they do not always understand every word. We share a wide range of literature with our children from their earliest days in school and encourage adventurous use of language, whilst modelling ways of using talk to communicate the big ideas that underpin every aspect of the curriculum. Space to think and to discuss are key

pedagogical skills that we seek to develop. For example, instead of writing book reviews children may engage in regular 'book gossip' sessions. Philosophical enquiry may emerge naturally from an aspect of learning or may be deliberately timetabled as a means of building and sustaining debate.

Here we listen in to a

conversation between two 10-year-old boys with the local farmer and their teacher, Stephen Davy, as they work in the school garden:

**Richard (farmer):** So what are you doing there boys?

**Theo:** We're just gonna put soil in here so we're going to test the soil.

**Richard:** What are you testing the soil for?

**Theo:** To see if it's the right soil because if it's acidic it won't be very good for some plants because if the bugs such as maggots they like the acid... but the carrots the potatoes and all that, grow in the ground – they don't like it? So then what would happen is... we won't get good crops, so then we need to make it at the top of that list (points to soil testing kit) which is alkaline.

**Alex:** Alkaline yes.

**Theo:** And that is very good for the plants.

**Richard:** OK.

**Alex:** So we're going to test this soil now, I think, and then we'll go from there.

*[As the boys try to dig down to the required depth of 12cm for testing the soil they encounter a membrane]*

**Stephen (teacher):** So boys what have we just discovered by testing the soil?

**Theo:** That there's a... (hesitates)

**Stephen:** What would you describe that as?

**Theo:** Um like a plastic sheet underneath, so we can't dig any further.

**Alex:** Yes, but what we think... there might be good soil underneath the plastic sheet. So this is all very very gravelly cos I think... cos over there is a load of stones and that has plastic sheet underneath, so I think this would have had a plastic sheet and then stones would have been put on this and then someone or something had put soil on here to make it more like level.

**Stephen:** We are trying to do a fair test here aren't we? We are trying to test Richard's 'no-dig' system of this HH-4 compost compared with shop-bought compost in those beds over there. But there's a membrane under here isn't there?

**Alex:** Yes.

**Stephen:** So how might that affect things when we are going forward?

**Alex:** Um well the instructions say you need to dig 12 cm deep.

**Theo:** So we can't do that because the membrane is stopping it.

**Stephen:** So we can't pH test the soil. Are there other implications of this membrane, this plastic sheeting underneath? What might it stop when we come to spring and summer?

**Theo:** So if we plant seeds down there the roots can't come down; they can't be free.

**Alex:** Yes they can't go straight down because that membrane is stopping it...



'Building a love of language as a means of expression is at the heart of any rich primary curriculum. Children enjoy the rhythm and cadences of language even if they do not always understand every word'

**Theo:** Then we can't plant crops there. And also, what we're going to have to do is... we're going to have to take the membrane up.

**Stephen:** Right.

**Theo:** We can't plant anything there!

**Stephen:** Good decision.

Conversation then ensues about getting help from the community Compost Committee to dig up the membrane in the growing area. Dialogue develops between the boys and their teacher, Stephen Davy, about coppicing hazel, developing a farm on the field outside the Celtic hut, growing conditions for plants and then moves on to a discussion about links between dinosaurs and robins...

**Stephen:** Oh look who's come to say 'hello' look!

**Theo:** It's a robin

**Richard:** They know there might be worms...

**Alex:** There was a worm in that hole.

**Richard:** They always come.

**Stephen:** Robins always come don't they?

**Richard:** We don't know why that is.

**Stephen:** So we've noticed this, Richard, when we've been digging here we've got one or two robins that come into the bushes and they just pounce on the earth.

**Richard:** For bugs.

**Stephen:** Straight onto it for any bugs any worms... do any other birds display that?

**Richard:** Robins have had that eternal relationship with the grower.

**Stephen:** Yes – so boys do you think robins have been following

farmers around for a long time?

**Theo:** Yes.

**Stephen:** Have a guess how long – I don't know the answer.

**Theo:** About four or five thousand years?

**Stephen:** I would say thousands of years actually, yes.

**Alex:** Yes.

**Stephen:** And blackbirds do something interesting to get their worms – do you know what they do boys?

**Theo:** Do they tap the ground? (demonstrates)

**Stephen:** They tap the ground with their feet – they hop around.

**Alex:** Oh yes (hopping). They make the worms come up.

**Stephen:** Are they actually making it rain?

**Theo:** No they're trying to like...

**Alex:** Fool the worms.

**Stephen:** So why would the worms come up when it's raining?

**Theo:** Cos they like the moisture – it's also like that dinosaur programme we were watching where it climbs out of the tree, it taps the wood and then...

**Alex:** Yes it sees what...

**Theo:** There are maggots inside and stuff that it can eat.

**Stephen:** That's a really interesting connection you've made there.

**Alex:** Yes 'cos it makes a hole.

**Stephen:** So was that the programme that you watched yesterday?

**Theo:** Yes! It was kind of a connection because robins and birds they like to go in trees and stuff and those animals liked to go in trees too.

**Stephen:** Well that's fascinating because you just said there was a dinosaur with a long 'finger' that tapped the tree to see if there were grubs inside to hook it out. How are archaeologists confident that that is what they did?

**Theo:** Yes there is a little furry thing...

**Stephen:** Yes a little furry thing that is alive today – a mammal – that uses its finger to pick into the bark.

**Theo:** Yes and the guy did an experiment to see what it was like.

**Alex:** Apparently it was easier to climb using a really long finger – he stabbed it in there and then he took it out...

**Stephen:** Like a fishing hook finger?

**Alex:** Yes!

**Stephen:** So boys you have made a connection there that I am really impressed with, that's fantastic learning. You've looked at the behavior of the birds, thinking about the behavior of the blackbird and you've made a connection with some history we were learning about yesterday, some dinosaurs and science and the behavior of dinosaurs. Is there a connection between birds and dinosaurs? Have you ever heard about that?

**Theo:** Yes there is because it has... because this was on the news the other day, they found a thing that looked like a bird from the dinosaur age and it looked very much like um... an... ostrich

**Stephen:** Mmmm, so we need to find out about the connection between birds and dinosaurs cos that behavior our robin has shown when he's sitting over there in that bush waiting for us – there he is – and also the blackbird we have discussed, some of the tactics the blackbird employs to try to get the little juicy grubs and worms, maybe that's behavior that goes right back to dinosaur times? How interesting it is boys!

### Making connections

Stephen Davy, the Year Five teacher, models asking questions of Richard. He allows the whole conversation to be taken over about birds and dinosaurs because of his own passion for learning, that the boys pick up on. Theo's decision 'we're going to have to take the membrane up!' illustrates his sense of agency very powerfully. The dialogue illustrates the essential principle of co-agency and centres around ideas, rather than control. Enabling children to make connections in their learning is key to developing understanding and intellectual capacity. These kinds of opportunities throughout school give purpose to developing oracy skills that build confidence and shine a light on the wonderful uniqueness of every child.

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## ORACY IN THE SECONDARY CURRICULUM – OUR JOURNEY AT Highbury Grove

Joining Highbury Grove as headteacher in 2014, I was immediately struck by the huge gulf between our most advantaged students and their more disadvantaged peers in terms of their confidence with speaking English. In a school with about 50% of students speaking English as an additional language and 70% in receipt of the pupil premium, there is a clear correlation between students' capacity to speak fluently, accurately and confidently and their social background. Although the school was securing superb results in the speaking and listening component of the English Language GCSE, there was no indication that this was reflected in the quality of their default-mode speech. I would even go as far as to say that, possibly, success in speaking and listening masked the much deeper issue that our students' oracy skills were and are often very weak.

In the classroom, our most advantaged students are supremely articulate and are able to contribute to lessons with confidence; this, in turn, reinforces their engagement with the learning process. However, since joining the school I have been struck by some students' lack of confidence with giving extended answers and how often they recoil from the suggestion of using more sophisticated terminology in their answers – as if this is something other people do but not them. To many students, making statements like 'the compound underwent thermal decomposition' or 'the corresponding angles are equal' is difficult on many levels. Beyond the first priority of learning the meaning of the terms there is a confidence barrier in using them. Students often simply don't feel comfortable using formal speech because it feels false; it isn't natural. This is clearly an impediment to learning.

I can recall hearing a group of Year 12 students reporting back to an early assembly about an exciting overseas trip that they had undertaken. Here, in a high-profile setting, the students were reporting in a speech mode that is very common: *'First we went market to buy food, then we done a long trek. We was so tired but I am glad we done it. It was amazing.'* It was obvious to me that we needed to take action; it wasn't appropriate to have such inaccurate speech deployed in a high-profile setting and it would be patronising to allow those students to think that was the best they could do.

I've been challenged on the issue of 'correctness' in spoken English; I am aware of the various socio-linguistic debates surrounding code-

switching in English speech, the value and richness of dialects within English and the fact that our language isn't static; it is evolving. However, as a teacher and headteacher it is beyond question that we place students at an enormous disadvantage if we do not teach them how to use the prevailing formal, standard English code if their background has not given them the skills to use it spontaneously. In my view, we should be very direct in asserting that, yes, there is such a thing as 'speaking properly' and it's our job to make sure every student knows how to do it when they need to, even if they talk differently most of the time; even if we accept that other speech modes are perfectly valid in the right context.



**'It is beyond question that we place students at an enormous disadvantage if we do not teach them how to use the prevailing formal, standard English code if their background has not given them the skills to use it spontaneously. In my view, we should be very direct in asserting that, yes, there is such a thing as 'speaking properly' and it's our job to make sure every student knows how to do to it when they need to'**

Our thinking about oracy has been developed in parallel with the development of an approach to curriculum planning influenced by Martin Robinson's superb book *Trivium 21<sup>st</sup> C*. Here, the 'three arts' of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric (or, put more simply: knowledge, exploration and communication) provide a very useful framework for considering how to structure and sequence learning. Crucially, 'rhetoric' is embedded in the whole concept. In seeking to develop all of our students into 'philosopher kids' able to take their place 'in the agora', it is imperative that they can express their ideas, communicate their knowledge and engage in debate effectively. In the spirit

of the trivium, rhetoric is not tacked on; it is a core element in the whole learning process; the whole learning experience. This thinking has inspired us in our quest to find strategies that help to develop our students' oracy skills.

In seeking to tackle oracy in a robust manner, I felt that a first step was to appoint a champion. We recruited a Director of Spoken Literacy from within the staff. We are fortunate to have Andrew Fitch in this post; an English teacher with a strong background with the English-Speaking Union and a passionate advocate for debating. Andrew and I have worked closely to map out the strategy for raising standards of oracy at Highbury Grove. This has three main elements:

### 1. Raising the profile of oracy and 'speaking properly'

To begin with we addressed the whole issue with staff and students through briefings and assemblies. We have made the case that all members of staff need to contribute to the process at every opportunity, in the classroom and beyond. Rather than overwhelming everyone with the task of tackling every possible speech error, we decided to focus on a few common issues. Andrew made posters for each classroom to highlight them:

We don't use fillers: 'umm, err, like'  
 We don't use double negatives: 'I ain't done nothing; there isn't nothing'  
 We say: 'we were' not 'we was'  
 We say: 'I did it', not 'I done it'  
 We never start to speak by saying 'basically'.

This is accompanied by some other general advice about giving presentations such as the need to look at the audience you are speaking to and not reading out what is written on a PowerPoint slide.

We have also promoted a simple bit of pedagogy that I have seen lots of teachers use very effectively: 'Say it again but say it better'. This simple response to students' half-formed, fumbled answers is hugely effective, giving students space to reframe the content of their answers into a grammatically correct sentence structure that contains the correct terminology.

### 2. Structured speech events in the classroom: the 'Rhetoric Roadmap'

As part of our trivium-influenced framework for teaching and learning, we encouraged teachers to employ a range of structured speech events in their lessons. Andrew ran one of his CPD strands on this theme; this was a popular choice with teachers from every department taking part. Some departments took to it immediately and, for example, we started seeing 'Rhetoric Time' established as a routine feature of art lessons. This is time at the end of lessons when every student talks about the work they've done.

However, within a few weeks, Andrew and I realised that, in too many cases, the general encouragement to use structured speech events in lessons wasn't necessarily taking hold. It was clear that there was a risk that students' experience would depend very much on how confident and enthusiastic their particular teachers were when we actually needed oracy to be developed systematically. We were hoping for something to happen, not to make it happen. This realisation led to the creation of the 'Rhetoric Roadmap'.

We asked every department to suggest specific oracy activities they would deliver for all students at different times in the year such that, in every half-term, every student would be guaranteed to have multiple opportunities to develop oracy skills. Andrew coordinated the responses to make sure each year group had a good spread of types of activities across the year. We then published this for parents to see. We are about to enter our second year with this established as a feature of our curriculum.

Here are some examples from the roadmap:

### Year 7

- Autumn 2 Philosophy and Religion. Scripted performance; Aquinas and Paley 'chat show' format.
- Spring 1 Science. Debate about 'designer babies'.
- Summer 1 Geography. Creation of audio guidebook to Islington following New River fieldwork.

### Year 8

- Autumn 1 English. Students take part in formal debate about human rights.
- Autumn 2 Maths. Pedagogic presentation on area and perimeter.
- Spring 2 Science. Presentation on light.
- Summer 2 English. Students perform modern adaptation of scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

### Year 9

- Autumn 1 English. Role play – the trial of Macbeth
- Spring 2 MFL. Formal presentation from memory: '*Ma vie sociale, la santé, les ambitions*'.
- Summer 2 Philosophy and Religion. Formal speech on treatment of ethical issues in *The Diving-Bell and The Butterfly*.

### Year 10

- Autumn 1 Sociology. Formal presentation without notes on social class inequality.
- Autumn 2 History. Formal presentation on 'Medicine Through Time'.
- Spring 1 Drama. Recitation – pieces from *Othello* and *The Crucible* learned by heart.

The roadmap applies to all students in Year 7-13. Now the concept has been established, our goal this year is to give time to evaluating the quality of each of the components. Step one is to make it happen; step two is to make it great! But you need to start somewhere.

### 3. Raising the profile of public speaking

The third component of our strategy has been to highlight oracy in public situations to the greatest extent possible. I feel it is important to have some set-piece showcases of oracy so that students can see that we give it value and can see models of excellence from within their peer group or older peer groups. This has included the following elements:

- Student leaders introducing every assembly; student-led assemblies. We try to have student input into every assembly ranging from simple introduction to extended presentations or recitations. Each student involved is coached in advance so that they speak well and model high standards to others.
- Year 10 Drama Monologue Evening. Here, GCSE drama students perform monologues learned by heart to an audience of parents and students. It's a very powerful event, giving students a turn in the spotlight that they would rarely have otherwise.
- Year 7 and 8: Poetry by Heart summer homework. We want all of our students to leave school with the ability to recite some poetry from memory. We've introduced a project whereby all students are asked to select a poem to learn by heart from a collection (Kipling, Shakespeare, Zephaniah amongst others). We will run assemblies where student recitations are profiled.
- Engagement with debating and public speaking competitions at various levels. This is an area that is very much at an early stage but it's firmly in our plan. We will soon be running inter-house and inter-school debates with a formal debating team. This happens at lots of other schools but, to-date, it hasn't been something we've done.

### Project Soapbox

The most significant event in this strand was our Year 8 Project Soapbox. The project was delivered through the English curriculum involving students drafting a two to three minute speech on a subject of their choice and then giving the speech to an audience of about 60 people. There were some logistical challenges in getting nearly 200 students to give a speech over the course of two days but it was a great success. Here is an excerpt from a report I wrote on my blog:

*So many wonderful things came out of this project. It's fantastic to hear the individual voices of our students, each with something to say. Very often they were nervous but, having completed their speech, they were beaming; the rewards of overcoming fears, rich and well-deserved. Some of the individual speeches were spectacular.*

*One highlight was a student whose low-key intro led into a full-blown extended beat poem recited from memory: antisocial social media; losing touch via our touch screens; too busy with wifi to say 'hi' or 'goodbye'; lots of 'friends' but friendless; connected but disconnected... a powerful and brilliant speech/poem. She gave a reprieve in our full-school assemblies to rapturous applause. I don't think that we'd have heard this without giving her this forum.*

*Another highlight was a boy who wrestles with his stammer every day; he could have opted out but, in discussion with his teachers, he gave it a go giving a wonderfully touching speech about having a stammer. Facing the challenge head-on, he did brilliantly well. His peers were suitably impressed.*

*The range of topics was great: forced marriage, in praise of YouTubers; educational inequality in developing countries; refugees; the death penalty; animal rights; feminism; the secret to Barcelona FC's success; why Chicken Shop workers should earn more than lawyers! To name but a few...*

*We are thrilled to have got this project off the ground. The next stage is to embed it further still with similar events in every year at KS3, making it part and parcel of school life. We also need to think further about the memorisation aspect. At School 21 they are clear that students must not have cue cards; they argue that this gives them a crutch they will always rely on and that, if they have no option, all students can learn to speak without notes. That's a challenge for us to consider. This time around, we were excited just to hear everyone speak; a good proportion didn't need their notes and they'll have shown the others what is possible.*

*Other improvements we could make are around the authenticity of the audience. We did invite parents but only a smattering could make it during the working day; perhaps we could raise the profile now we know how good it could be. We could also go further still to achieve 100% engagement. With 193 out of 210 students involved, we did pretty well but despite extensive efforts and copious encouragement from their teachers, some students were simply too nervous; some were conspicuously absent on the day! I hope that once it is established as a routine feature of school life, we'll get closer to full participation.*

*As with everything, this is a work in progress. I'm not inviting people to visit my school to see fabulously dazzling oracy in action across the school. We are not there yet. We are realistic about where we are; we've only just begun the journey. However, based on the progress we've made already, I am hugely optimistic about what we can achieve and about the vital importance oracy will have in securing strong outcomes for our students in all that they do, at school and beyond.*



*It is imperative that students can express their ideas, communicate their knowledge and engage in debate effectively*



## GEOFF BARTON

### Headteacher, King Edward VI School

Since 2002, Geoff Barton has been headteacher of King Edward VI School, Bury St Edmunds, an 11-18 comprehensive school of 1,600 students. He has written and edited more than 100 books on grammar and literacy. He has worked as a consultant to various government agencies, including the DfE, and writes columns for various publications, including the *Times Education Supplement*. He served for eight years as a council member of the Association of School and College Leaders, chairing its Pedagogy Committee. He is a trustee of the National Literacy Association and was appointed a 'Leading Thinker' for the National Education Trust. He is on the steering group of the Tony Little Centre for Innovation and Research in Learning at Eton College, chaired by Professor Bill Lucas. He teaches English.

He tweets as **@RealGeoffBarton**

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## SECONDARY SCHOOL DEBATING: ENTERING LANGUAGE'S CORRIDORS OF POWER

I had the kind of university-based teacher training that the current government appears to despise.

Fresh from our degrees, those of us who had chosen teaching as a career were taught in faculties of education, chiefly by people who were not themselves classroom teachers, where we were set regular written essays on topics linked to the history, sociology and psychology of education.

Like most of my contemporaries, I found the hands-on work in school more relevant, more challenging, and certainly more interesting.

But I don't dismiss such an academic underpinning of my training as blithely as some people seem to. I think it may have helped me to become a more reflective teacher, and I certainly benefited from time away from my inner-city teaching practice in Leicester schools simply to read, think, discuss, readjust my ideas, and mentally recuperate.

And it was there, at Leicester University in 1984, that I was introduced to a theory that has driven much of my teaching over the past 31 years, and which to my mind has greater urgency than ever. It came about in one of those 'Sociology of Education' lectures. Here we were acquainted with the ideas of sociologist Basil Bernstein who was then Professor at London's Institute of Education.

Bernstein talked of two language codes – one 'restricted', the other 'elaborated'. Restricted code, according to his thesis, is language use with shared assumptions. It's the language we use at home, with people we know. It leaves much unsaid. Many of its meanings remain implicit because users have a joint context and established relationships.

The elaborated code makes meanings more explicit – it explains ideas, based on the assumption that speakers and listeners may not have the same kind of tacit shared knowledge. So far, you might say, so theoretical. But it is the elaborated code which dominates education, the law courts, the media, the civil service. It is the discourse of the powerful with its own phrases, its own vocabulary, its own convention. A child without access to the elaborated code is therefore disadvantaged if she or he is to succeed in those areas of life where most influence is wielded

Of course, I oversimplify a theory that is already prone to oversimplification. It is also a thesis that is easily accused of presenting a reductivist view of working class life. But caveats aside, this idea had a profound influence on my teaching of English and my interest in literacy. It still does.



‘Because if we are genuine in our mission to give opportunities to children of all backgrounds, then it isn’t just skills and knowledge that they need to be taught. It’s also the language habits of those who wield power and influence. If we want young people to join us as part of the literacy club, then we need to teach them the rules, the etiquette, the habits’

Because if we are genuine in our mission to give opportunities to children of all backgrounds, including those from the most disadvantaged households, then it isn’t just skills and knowledge that they need to be taught. It’s also the language habits of those who wield power and influence. If we want young people to join us as part of the literacy club, then we need to teach them the rules, the etiquette, the habits.

I noticed this early on in my teaching. In my first year at a comprehensive school in Leeds,

a Year 10 student handed in the first draft of some descriptive writing. I read the opening sentence. It went something like this: ‘The golden orb beat down from amid the azure wilderness’.

‘Erm, what does this mean, Helen?’ I asked.

Fifteen-year-old Helen peered at me as though I was being deliberately dim.

‘It means the sun was shining’.

It was terrible writing but it showed that Helen sensed something that I’ve continued to explore since – that our vocabulary is in itself a gateway to success. For her, big words were better than little words. A ‘golden orb’ was more redolent with meaning than ‘sun’ and an ‘azure wilderness’ more descriptive than ‘sky’.

In this instance, she was wrong. Her language was clumsy, overblown, self-consciously otiose. But look at the sentence I’ve just written. Look at the peacock-style expression I’ve just used – a level of linguistic showing off that isn’t that much different from Helen’s.

I’ve since read about Robert K. Merton’s concept of The Matthew Effect (how the rich get richer while the poor get poorer); considered Daniel Rigný’s application of this in his *The Matthew Effect: How Advantage Begets Further Advantage*; absorbed Geoffrey Miller’s link between vocabulary size and the way humans judge each other (*The Mating Mind*); and explored many studies of cultural literacy and the significance of vocabulary.

In doing so, I have become obsessed with the idea that we have a duty to teach to the ‘word poor’ the insights and habits of the ‘word rich’. Because Helen implicitly knew something about the link between

language and power. That is, in our culture – in schools, for example – the child who writes ‘In the book the writer says...’ can easily be judged as less intelligent as the one who writes ‘In the novel the author suggests...’. ‘Novel’ is more specific than ‘book’; ‘suggests’ is more analytical than ‘says’. This the word rich know.

Thus precision in vocabulary – not simply big words for their own sake – are a proxy for knowledge and understanding, for the way people judge us and for our personal ability to express ideas about the world. And it matters in speaking as much as it does in writing.

That’s why I’m not especially concerned that speaking & listening have been removed from the overall aggregation of GCSE English. Formal spoken assessment was, to my mind, getting in the way. It may in fact have been warping classroom talk into something compartmentalised, easily tick-offable for the purposes of assessment, instead of allowing us to use oracy as a vehicle for learning and empowerment.

So what matters to me isn’t how speaking and listening is assessed. It’s making sure that they happen in every classroom across every subject in every school – high-quality talk, in different contexts, for different purposes and audiences, supported by high-quality active listening.

Teach these well and we equip our students for success in life. And the latest incarnation of the National Curriculum reinforces the same message. Here are the Programmes of Study for key stage 3:

### Spoken English

Pupils should be taught to speak confidently and effectively, including through:

- using Standard English confidently in a range of formal and informal contexts, including classroom discussion
- giving short speeches and presentations, expressing their own ideas and keeping to the point
- participating in formal debates and structured discussions, summarising and/or building on what has been said
- improvising, rehearsing and performing play scripts and poetry in order to generate languages and discuss language use and meaning, using role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact.

There’s heavy emphasis here on talk being used publicly – for persuasion and performance. There’s a helpful link between speech and

thinking, and between body language and speaking. It provides a strong justification for teaching more explicitly to students a set of skills that might too easily have been important in certain kinds of classrooms at certain types of school.

So part of my mission over the past 10 years has been to apply this interest in the arena traditionally most dominated by the word rich, often by those from more privileged backgrounds. It's my fascination with competitive debating.

Note, this isn't public speaking. It isn't teaching young people to write a well-crafted speech, to learn it by heart, and then to deliver it to an audience. That's an important skill. But to my mind, debating matters more.

Because debating unleashes thinking. It celebrates the ability to analyse. It's more spontaneous. It channels an ability to decide what matters, which arguments count, and then trains us to express those views in a mode of language that will win our case and impress those who judge us. In no other area of school life can we pay a greater service to the word poor than by initiating them into an activity traditionally dominated by the word rich.

When I first became interested in debating, I'd take the teams from my comprehensive school to competitions at formidable university venues, such as the debating chambers at Oxford, Cambridge and Durham. We still do this, travelling to 20 or so competitions each year, with different groups of students aged 14 to 19.

In those early days, I spoke to a veteran debating coach whose independent day school boys robotically crushed every team against whom they competed. Their talent for taking any topic, then to be assigned any debating position (opening government, closing opposition), and then with just 15 minutes of closed preparation time to be able to weave compelling, fluent, lucid, unimpeachable speeches – this mesmerised me.

I asked the coach: 'How do you train them to do this?' Over-modestly, but revealingly, she replied: 'I don't. They are north London boys who spend each breakfast and evening meal sitting at the kitchen table arguing with their parents about what's in the *Daily Telegraph*. Why wouldn't they win?'

Thus my interest in debating is to do what we can to recreate that culture of conversation, of controlled verbal dispute, of connecting abstract ideas to our own experience and making it accessible to youngsters who may not have a dining table in their house, let alone daily conversations across it with an adult each day.

This is a call-to-arms for teaching the elaborated code. Because in bringing a debating culture into school, we bring our students into contact with a culture that in too many of our state schools they might not otherwise encounter. It's an act of social liberation. It's why I'm proud to be associated with various initiatives to broaden the constituency of schools involved in debating – in particular the recent development of the PiXL Club's 'Up for Debate' tournament, which culminated in a grand final in the debating chamber at Eton College.

In terms of the impact of debating on students' oracy, here are my insights.

First, debating has a specific vocabulary. It has a formality. It moves us linguistically to forms of speaking that carry prestige – to words that matter, and forms of delivery that are associated with successful communication.

Some of this is about vocabulary. By its nature debating will use more Latinate vocabulary – *suggest* over *says*. It will bring with it abstract concepts relating to justice, or human rights, or hypothetical concepts of what we should ban or unban.

Debating also embeds a habit of formality. For example, it takes fillers like 'er' and 'you know' and it replaces them with mannered but high status fillers – such as 'ladies and gentlemen'. The student who is asked to speak about why school uniform is a good or bad idea, might start: 'Blazers and ties, ladies and gentlemen, might make adults feel happier, but they have nothing to do with the quality of education'.

We know that in colloquial, everyday talk, fillers are a key feature. We know that coordinated sentences dominate (sentences in which clauses are linked by coordinating conjunctions such as 'and' and 'but'). This is how we speak. We know that more informal prosodic features such as uptalk – in which there's an upward intonation at the end of sentences – that these are associated with everyday language.

But we also know that these linguistic features are not generally associated with prestige. The language of power tends to prize precision, fluency, formality.

'In bringing a debating culture into school, we bring our students into contact with a culture that in too many of our state schools they might not otherwise encounter. It's an act of social liberation'



'Debating unleashes thinking. It celebrates the ability to analyse. It channels an ability to decide what matters, which arguments count, and then trains us to express those views in a mode of language that will win our case and impress those who judge us'

Debating therefore allows young people to practise modes of language which carry such prestige – the words, phrases, sentences and rhetorical devices which build confidence that translates into social skills and, in my experience, into an ability to be able to write better, as the mind gets trained to structure ideas and express them more powerfully, more formally and more precisely.

It's why debate as a form should feature from time to time in every classroom in every subject, on every extra-curricular activity list and – crucially – in school assemblies. Assemblies matter because students can then see that it's not just crusty, ageing blokes like me who can use powerful words in persuasive ways, but it's also people like them, of their age and their background.

In doing this, I believe, we give our students a huge linguistic advantage, opening doors into a new, often unfamiliar mode of self-expression. With that comes greater self-confidence in responding to the world and in expressing views about it.

And with that more young people are inducted into modes of communication and linguistic habits through which they can feel on a par with, and no longer inferior to, the word rich around them.

It's precisely why many of us trained to teach in the first place.



Debating moves us linguistically to forms of speaking that carry prestige – to words that matter, and forms of delivery that are associated with successful communication



**IAN GILBERT**  
Author and Consultant

Ian Gilbert is one of the UK's leading educational innovators, speakers and writers with 20 years' experience working with young people and educationalists around the world. He is the founder of Independent Thinking Ltd, the editor of the *Independent Thinking* series of books and the author of a number of titles including *Why Do I Need a Teacher When I've Got Google?*. His book *The Little Book of Thunks* won the first education book award from the Society of Authors for 'an outstanding example of traditionally published non-fiction that enhances teaching and learning'.

## ORACY IN AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS CONTEXT

The Chinese tourists in their Ferraris barely notice it as they drive through Hong Kong's prestigious Gold Coast. Hidden by a colonial-era military fence in a sprawling barracks that used to house Gurkhas for the British Army is an organisation called Crossroads. It ships dozens of containers a week of unwanted clothing, furniture and other supplies to developing countries and disaster zones (more often than not one and the same) and runs powerful simulations for local children and world leaders in the life of refugees, of the poor, of people with river blindness, of people with AIDS. For over 20 years they have been making a genuine and tangible difference worldwide. Their secret weapon is DJ, the inspirational son of the charity's founders. His secret weapon is oracy.

Speaking, and listening carefully, to DJ is to comprehend quickly a definition of oracy that will serve us well in this context – that it is the ability to change the course of world events using meaningful sounds. Passion, humour, eloquence, pitch, tone, metaphor, rhetoric, all delivered with the holy grail of politicians everywhere, authenticity, DJ in full tilt is a masterclass in oracy with purpose, his watchword through it all: 'service'.

In a city where wealth and prestige are held in such high esteem, in which poverty is simply not cool and whose Gini coefficient, a measure of income disparity, is one of the highest in the developed world, he has learned that it is not only essential to build a bridge between the haves and the have-nots but that it is also possible. It is a bridge, though, that no one person or organisation can build and explains the frequency with which DJ brings service and oracy into play with international schools across the region.

Unlike the majority of the state and government schools I have visited on my travels to various parts of the world, the international school sector positions 'service learning' very high on its list of objectives, in most cases just below academic success. This is something fuelled in no small measure by the International Baccalaureate organisation's demand that each student undertaking its prestigious Diploma in post-16 education will earn 'CAS points' over the course of the two-year programme. CAS – Creativity, Activity and Service – serve to push IB students to be more 'rounded' than their peers studying exclusively academic qualifications such as A Levels. According to the IB, 'Service' is:

'An unpaid and voluntary exchange that has a learning benefit for the student.'

To serve, to help those 'less fortunate', to 'save the world' – essentially this is part of the school curriculum in the vast majority

of international schools. That said, it is the manner of such an undertaking, and particularly the part that oracy plays in it as per our definition above, that can make the difference between simply earning the necessary CAS points to open the doors of the world's most prestigious universities and doing so whilst actually making a difference at the same time.

By way of understanding what we mean by an 'international school', consider the three main constituents of its student body:

- The sons and daughters of the developed world's international elite – for example ex-pat bankers, diplomats, engineers, those serving world organisations such as the United Nations or the IMF.
- The sons and daughters of the elite of the host country – those who want a more international outlook and education for their children and who want them to pick up the language and the qualifications that will open doors to prestigious universities and work places across the world.
- The sons and daughters of the teaching staff – perhaps as close to a 'comprehensive education' as we are going to achieve in this context.

Children, particularly those in the first and last categories, are known as 'third culture kids'. Given the constant moving between countries, the friends and teachers of so many nationalities, the place of birth being different from the place of residence which could be different again from the nationality on the front of the passport, already dog-eared even though the bearer is just ten, it is not that a child has no culture, or even multiple cultures. It is that the child has one that is forged from the combination of all these experiences. These are the third culture children, and language – learning different ones and using them to good effect – is a big part of what makes them such a powerful force.

As an example, let me suggest Island School in Hong Kong, a typical international school in so many ways (although atypical for me in that two of my children have gone there and my wife is one of its Vice Principals). Established in 1967 to serve the British community, the school now holds approximately 1,200 students of over 40 nationalities. Internationalism, service, leadership and communication are at the heart of its mission. Academic success is something almost taken as read. The teachers and the students work hard and achieve tremendous results in both the IB and the range of BTEC qualifications it offers but that is not its overriding purpose. This is a school whose teachers have a

clear answer for the question I so often put to teachers in the UK – what are they learning while you are teaching them?

At Island School having top-quality speakers coming into school to address the young people is almost a weekly occurrence. From Hollywood cinematographers who live in Hong Kong to local politicians, businesspeople, artists and innovators to mountaineers, record-breaking global cyclists to Sir Peter Wall, former Chief of the General Staff and head of the British Army until 2014, the students are met with an endless stream of fascinating people to listen to and to talk with which in turn feeds into their own opportunities to stand up and speak to their teachers, their peers and their parents.

Although putting a wonderfully eclectic group of speakers in front of children and giving them the opportunity to think, to speak and to listen may not be anything new in the independent sector – although the breadth of Island School's visitors would be hard to beat – it is not something that I perceive to be commonplace in a country's state schools. And those schools – and the children in them – are the poorer for it.

One event held recently in the school focused on Saul Alinsky's ground breaking (and increasingly forgotten) 1971 book *Rules for Radicals* in which I was invited to speak along with the editor from a Hong Kong-based (but not entirely China friendly) online business journal. Where many international schools encourage young people to speak up, few seem entirely happy with encouraging their students to speak out. My experience of international education in the Middle East and also in South America backs this up. Speaking up is an oracy skill that can be benign and usually is. Debates have changed the world as much as conferences or praying. Speaking out can get young people into trouble (and, as such, it could be argued that dealing with such trouble is as much a part of the skill of oracy as learning how to whip people up to make that trouble).

With so much focus in the independent and international sectors on developing leadership skills in young people, it is worth highlighting here a distinction that Alinsky makes between a leader and an organiser. While we see leaders such as Martin Luther King or John F Kennedy or



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Nelson Mandela hitting the headlines with their rousing speeches it is the skill of the organiser we should perhaps focus on. Alinsky suggests that to be a great organiser entails mastering a range of traits including irreverence, imagination and a sense of humour, yet it is the ability to communicate that tops them all:

One can lack any of the qualities of an organizer - with one exception - and still be effective and successful. That exception is the art of communication. It does not matter what you know about anything if you cannot communicate to your people. In that event you are not even a failure. You're just not there.

Furthermore, given that the oracy we are pushing to be (re)adopted in our state schools involves developing both speaking and listening skills, it is worth noting what Alinsky also has to say on the latter:

Further, communication is a two-way process. If you try to get your ideas across to others without paying attention to what they have to say to you, you can forget about the whole thing.

There is another reason why developing great oracy skills in young people is important while they are in education (or to be discouraged, depending on your perspective on the role of state education). It helps young people to think for themselves. After all, as the saying goes, 'How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?'

For schools doing the IB effectively, the 'Learner Profile' is at the heart of the answer to my question about what children are learning while we are teaching them.

The desired traits, skills and qualities are embodied in keywords such as 'Inquirers', 'Open Minded', 'Risk-Takers' and 'Reflective' and two in particular go hand in hand:

**Thinkers.** They exercise initiative in applying thinking skills critically and creatively to recognise and approach complex problems, and make reasoned, ethical decisions. IB students contribute to discussions in a meaningful way.

**Communicators.** They understand and express ideas and information confidently and creatively in more than one language and in a variety of modes of communication. They work effectively and willingly in collaboration with others.

It is no accident that thinking and communicating are side by side in the IB learner profile and that 'contributing to discussions' comes under the Thinker banner. The one develops the other and, indeed, what is the purpose of the former without developing the latter? Thinking without speaking is so much naval gazing. Speaking without thinking, despite the rise of the dangerous political buffoon in our 'post factual' age, worse still.

If this is the case, that speaking, listening, thinking and acting are so inextricably linked, why would we have a situation in our state schools where speaking up and speaking out, where listening critically, where thinking and thinking for oneself are effectively being devalued to be replaced by the hollow regurgitation of this year's facts and other people's opinions?

I am sure that those more cynical than I would argue that it also has something to do with how difficult, and therefore costly, it is to assess, moderate and award a grade for words that are spoken as opposed to written, regardless of the destabilising power of their intent. That listening critically is not something easy to examine and quantify, even if it were desirable. Perhaps there is a reason why the IB's Primary Years and Middle Years Programmes are very rarely implemented in state schools in the UK and where the uptake of its IB Diploma is relatively small and becoming smaller.

Whatever the cause, the fact is that children whose voice needs to be heard the most are facing a situation in which that voice will be heard the least. Indeed, having the charitable children of the rich and fortunate to speak up for them as part of their 'CAS' activities carries with it a certain irony. It is not that charity is intrinsically wrong, it is that it does rather ensure the perpetuity of the status quo. 'The icing on a rotting cake' as I have argued elsewhere.

Thinking, acting and inspiring others to act is what DJ does for a living, each one enhanced by his skill in oracy. Without that skill, he is just some guy mumbling about the world's inequalities. With it he, and all those young people around the world fortunate enough to have thinking, service and oracy as part of their daily curriculum diet, have the chance to do something about it.

'We have a situation in our state schools where speaking up and speaking out, where listening critically, where thinking and thinking for oneself are effectively being devalued to be replaced by the hollow regurgitation of this year's facts and other people's opinions'





## AMANDA MOORGHEN

Senior Research and Resources Officer  
English-Speaking Union

Amanda Moorghen leads the Research and Resources team at the English-Speaking Union. Before joining the ESU, she studied philosophy at the University of Birmingham, which is also where she discovered the joys and benefits of debate. During her time at university, Amanda debated, judged and coached around the world, and was on the Chief Adjudication team for the European Universities Debating Championships. Having seen how transformative debate and discussion can be, Amanda joined the ESU to help support teachers in bringing oracy skills to the classroom.

## ORACY THROUGH DEBATE

The essays in *Speaking Frankly* provide a testament to the wide range of benefits that oracy teaching can bring. We know that having access to high-quality oracy education can make all the difference in the lives of young people, and the role of oracy education in social mobility, thinking skills, employability, well-being and creativity is well documented in these pages. This article will explore the various ways in which debate, as a mode of oracy teaching, offers particular enhancements to those benefits of oracy education.

### What is debate?

Debate takes many different forms in classrooms in the UK and around the world. For the purposes of this article, we'll consider debate as a broad family of argument-focused spoken activities. At one end of the range, this includes debate/argument-focused activities that may take place during classroom teaching, or may form part of an extracurricular debate club. At the other end of the range, it includes debates with fixed rules about speaking order, length of preparation and conduct during the debate. These debates may take place as part of a lesson, debate club or inter-school competition, and may have an audience of any size or none at all.

These debate activities all have in common a focus on developing students' reasoning, listening and presentation skills. They all often require students to defend positions that they may not hold personally.

### Critical thinkers, Confident communicators, Empowered citizens

The three families of outcome that this article will focus on are based on the three qualities that the English-Speaking Union seeks to foster through all of its oracy work. Each element makes a virtue of the others: someone who is a confident communicator and an empowered citizen, but who doesn't think critically, would struggle to maximise their positive effect on those around them.

### Critical thinkers

Appropriately, there is a great variety of definitions of critical thinking, each seemingly more controversial than the last. For our purposes, this article will consider the critical thinker as someone who is 'able to reason, reflect and make sound decisions', a broad definition that encompasses the outcomes we value. This section will focus on two cornerstones of critical thinking skills, and examine the contribution of debating to the development of those foundational elements: first, metacognition, and second, a transferable knowledge base.

### Metacognition

Metacognitive strategies, or ‘thinking about thinking’, are processes students can use to reflect on their own thinking or learning, and thus regulate it. The term may refer to discrete strategies like, ‘consider both sides of an issue’ or to more general approaches to learning, for example learning how to set goals, monitor your own progress and manage your own motivation towards learning. The current evidence base suggests that metacognitive skills make a strong contribution to students’ academic progress, with some approaches seeing gains of as much as 9 months’ progress.



‘Debate helps students to develop metacognitive strategies to aid the development of analytical or persuasive speech or writing’

Debate helps students to develop metacognitive strategies to aid the development of analytical or persuasive speech or writing. First, the activity itself requires students to engage in continual reflection on the strength of their argumentation, and their chosen method of

presentation. Students are aware that the arguments will be critiqued promptly by their opponents, and thus are motivated to develop and practice metacognitive strategies that allow them to hone their speeches. These strategies can be explicitly taught, and students often supplement taught instruction with their own metacognitive processes.

Further, debate offers many opportunities for students to receive peer-to-peer feedback, and for this to be structured, purposive and constructive. The team nature of most debating formats encourages students to work together to develop ideas into strong arguments, offering students immediate feedback on the strongest and weakest elements of their initial thoughts, with a clear focus on how to improve. In addition, most debating takes place within classroom or club environments, where students are often encouraged to take on a role as an adjudicator as well as a speaker. In these cases, students benefit from teachers or more experienced students modelling feedback methods, as they prepare to deliver detailed advice and comments to their peers.

### Debate motivates learning

Research suggests that when students are given the opportunity to debate, they are more likely to attend class, do additional work, and complete secondary education. As such, debating can operate as a vehicle for generating academic buy-in from students, who may otherwise remain unengaged.

Some research has found that the competitive nature of debate is a driver in motivating students to learn more. Others emphasise the role debate can play in helping students to understand real world issues: through debate, students develop a factual knowledge base that helps them to understand and therefore be interested by live political and international issues.

### Confident communicators

All forms of high-quality oracy education help students to develop confidence in their own communication skills. It is crucial for students to have the opportunity to speak in a wide range of settings, and in front of audiences of differing types and sizes: a student who will speak confidently in a classroom full of their peers may nevertheless be a bag of nerves if asked to speak in front of an audience of strangers! Only experience speaking in a range of settings can imbue students with the belief that they can speak in front of any crowd, on any occasion.

Debate offers students a rare opportunity to speak in a formal setting, without that necessarily involving a large or intimidating audience. For example, many classroom debates will take place with a small audience of peers, and in competitive settings a debate’s audience may be limited to a small adjudication panel. This stands in contrast to other formal settings, which may include speaking in front of assemblies, or when invited to represent the school at an external event.

Further, students should have the opportunity to develop as public speakers with a range of lengths of preparation. Classroom debating ranges from allowing students many days to prepare, to asking students to speak with as little as 15 minutes’ preparation. However, all formats of debate require students to be flexible during the debate itself: students are required to improvise responses to arguments they are hearing for the first time, and to adjust the content of their own speeches to take into account the ideas and focus of their opponents.

When we take into account the potential audience and the range of preparation times allowed in different formats of debating, we see that



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the combination of formality, small audiences, and limited amounts of scripted speech bear similarities to meetings or seminars that students may need to take part in in later life. In all cases, whilst students can do some preparation beforehand, an ability to listen carefully and respond quickly to the ideas they hear on the day is crucial.

**‘Research suggests that university seminars are often dominated by a small number of more confident students, and half of the UK’s businesses are dissatisfied with the communication skills of school-leavers. As such, it is critical that oracy teaching equips students with the confidence and skills to thrive in a range of environments that they are likely to encounter upon leaving school’**

Research suggests that university seminars are often dominated by a small number of more confident students, and half of the UK’s businesses are dissatisfied with the communication skills of school-leavers. As such, it is critical that oracy teaching equips students with the confidence and skills to thrive in a range of environments that they are likely to encounter upon leaving school. Debate provides an excellent opportunity for students to take part in a familiar speech activity in a range of settings, from small classroom debates to debates in front of big audiences.

In addition to providing this confidence, debate embeds confident communication in the

habits and practice of active listening. Debate requires attentive listening combined with thoughtful response, and gives students many opportunities to hone these skills. When we consider the everyday environments in which communication skills are critical, the need to pair students’ confidence with their ability and willingness to listen is immediately apparent.

### Empowered citizens

All students should have access to the skills and knowledge necessary to play a full part in civic and political life. To do so, students require information about the political process, the ability to handle disagreement and the confidence to voice their own opinions.

First, debate offers a proven method of teaching students about the political system, elevating the core principles and processes of democracy (the value of argument and reason, the right of everyone to make a choice, and the importance of wisdom in that choice) above what may otherwise seem like abstract elements of parliamentary procedure.

Further, whilst there are of course many ways in which students can learn about current affairs, debate offers students a unique ability to distil live political issues into the areas of disagreement, and thus to understand the facts, history and ideology that lie behind contemporary political debate in the context in which they will be deployed.

Second, debate offers students the skills and practice they need to handle disagreement constructively. The format’s emphasis on separating ideas from the people espousing them (debaters are frequently asked to defend positions that are not their own), and frequent moments of direct disagreement (in responses during speeches, questions etc.) encourage students to feel confident disagreeing appropriately and constructively in formal or semi-formal settings. Whilst it’s important that students feel confident in a range of speech settings, feeling confident that you know how to disagree in an appropriate manner allows students to use their critical thinking skills in public life, and reap the rewards of challenging their own world-views and those of others in robust, informal debate.

Finally, debating encourages students to believe that they have valuable contributions to make, whether in class or in wider life. The use of topics of real world significance shows students the connection between the oracy work they engage in in the classroom, and the wider world. Further, students are aware that they are developing skills that are of use in wider political discussion. As such, debate equips students with the knowledge and confidence needed to engage as citizens in both civic and political life.

In addition to the above, debate may often provide students with concrete opportunities to engage in civic and political life. Involvement in school-level debating can lead to opportunities to visit the Houses of Parliament, meet MPs and other members of political life, engage with a range of civic institutions ranging from universities to advocacy groups. As such, debate can offer students the ability to involve themselves directly in politics and in their communities at a young age.

At the ESU, we recognise that debate cannot and should not be the only route for oracy teaching, but its unique benefits mean we believe that every student should have the opportunity to debate.

**BEN CRYSTAL**

Actor

Ben Crystal is an actor and the artistic director of *Passion in Practice* and its Shakespeare Ensemble. Together they have performed staged readings of *Macbeth*, *Henry V*, and *Dr Faustus* at the Wanamaker Playhouse, Shakespeare's Globe, and produced minimal rehearsal, cue-script rehearsed sold-out limited-runs of these plays in full production at a Wanamaker-like Loft in London. In the first half of 2016, they opened the British Council's *Shakespeare Lives* program at the Middle Temple, curated the British Library's *Shakespeare Birthday Celebrations* on April 23rd, restaged their *Pericles: Recomposed* at the Savannah Music Festival, before raising *Dr Faustus* in OP at Shakespeare's Globe. He is the author of several books including *Shakespeare on Toast – Getting a Taste for the Bard* (Icon), *Springboard Shakespeare* and, with his father David Crystal, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Shakespeare* (OUP).

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## ORACY THROUGH DRAMA

**'The techniques of the theater are the techniques of communicating.'**

Viola Spolin

Once, we were a storytelling people. We spent our time in groups, speaking, communicating with each other around fires. Now, our cultures shelter separately around the cool light of a small screen.

I love my phone – but recently I've tried to spend more time away from it. Time apart from a phone or the Internet is a thought experiment now, rather than the norm. Look up (from the screen you're most likely reading this on): if you're out and about, two-thirds of the people around you will have their necks bent, and their thumbs twitching. Digital detox is the new superfood.

How do you check what the weather will be like? Do you know what a rain-cloud looks like? Do you look up, or down?

How is the constant use of these devices changing our brains? We're no longer an isolated species; instead we're plugged in, connected, verbose – but dumb. We are spending greater and greater quantities of time looking down rather than looking up, and seem to have decided that being in written touch with each other, all the time, is the way modern society works best.

With a phone, the art of writing (which begged a knowledge of punctuation and grammar – crafts taught in school that always carried with them a nagging suspicion that the rules seemed slightly too complicated to *truly* master) has been replaced by a boundless freedom to play with language in text however we like, via the Internet, from Facebook to Twitter, and beyond to the Snapchats and theWhatsapps.

In the early part of the 21st century, we are dedicating countless hours to writing on screens, while allowing the powers of spoken rhetoric and eloquence to drift away from us. Meanwhile, most folk are as mercury-quick at deft thumb-textual repartee as the verbal parrying of Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Now each of us, irrespective of education or background, creates, studies, or observes written craft every day, in varying forms and degrees of quality, while our individual vocal identity is only just starting to be represented on the Internet.

Indeed, since we started consuming more media than food, our social circles have become potentially infinite, truly larger than life – but we've become ever more vocally silent within them. We can be connected to such a huge number of friends any dilemma of choice is removed: Friend or Unfriend? Follow or Unfollow? We no longer even

have to speak or write to tell someone we're disassociating, we can simply, silently, click-remove them from our lives.

Where can we experience and study brilliant – or even terrible – oracy? Where can we experience the power and art of persuasion, and the clarity and economy of someone expressing themselves through simple, direct and articulate vocal means?

More than that, as the combination of these skill sets is merely the foundation, the starting blocks: having acquired them, in order to race along one needs to build an understanding of physicality; of body language; to add poetic flourishes if you want to; to develop an acute understanding of our surroundings and how the space you're in affects what you say and how you say it; all while responding to the varying qualities of the listeners doing the listening.

### Where art thou, Oracy?

A performance-poet friend of mine called LionHeart makes his living from oracy, but he's one of few in his generation leading the way on a relatively quiet road.

Standing in front of people and speaking is a terrifying idea for most, as any such thing would be, without practice or craft. We encourage our younglings to talk out their problems with us – but we don't teach them *how*. Don't say it this way or that, don't use that word or this. But there's little arena for Do, Try, Play, Explore, Fail, Fail Again, Fail Better.

As Sir Ken Robinson wrote, 'We have to rethink the fundamental principles on which we're educating our children.' Our younglings are too much tested and too little taught, schooled with tools of mathematical or literary critical studies, and few leave education with the holistic skills that help tackle everyday life: they may learn how to use the Internet, but few are taught how to fill in a tax return, how to help a body to work to encourage a long, healthy life, or indeed, how to vocally express themselves at a job interview.

Anyone can be eloquent, but it's a real challenge to find a place to master oracy, and to be aware of the power of persuasion, to do what Barack Obama did to a crowd in November 2008, or Martin Luther King in 1963. Others have used that power to negative effect too, of course.

Indeed in the political arena, those most skilled certainly can, with an hour's prepared speech, set an auditorium of thousands a-fire in excitement. We're learning, though, it can be immediately trounced, countered, and bested by 140 characters which in a heartbeat can win over the opposite opinion in the hearts and minds of *millions*.

The pen is certainly mightier than the sword, but the word spoken

was once sharper than both: an age of gifted orators would make for a demanding next generation.

### Modern eloquence

So when our young folk look to everyday, modern written and spoken culture for inspiration, what do they see?

Vocal eloquence in a person like LionHeart is rare to encounter, but if we reach higher up in the hierarchy of speech, up into song, we've been lovers of ballad-makers and singers for thousands of years.

A step down from song and the scaffold structure of the once hugely popular Sonnet form – a favourite in Shakespeare's time – is barely seen in 2016. Skipping down again, past regular poetry for a moment to prose, and our storytellers and orators (now mostly confined to the pages of books) have been surging again in popularity, right across the age ranges. But while the fight for literacy is still a much-needed crusade, the dispute is focused now more on media: *how* to buy a book (e-reader or paper, eco-friendly and light vs actual page-turn and heavy) as opposed to *whether* you'll buy a book.

Podcasts have replaced our love affair with audiobooks, and the pre-recorded vloggers of YouTube, or the rapid-fire, succinct presenters of the 90-second news flashes are perhaps where oracy is at its most prevalent.

Poetry is surely the rarest part of speech of all to encounter in day-to-day life, yet it is the most provocative, the richest seam to mine. Gold in the speech hierarchy mountain, it sits carefully balanced between the prosaic norm and the dizzying heights of, and special skill-set necessary for, song.

'We don't all sing, we don't all play music, but we all speak,' said the poet George Szirtes.

Poetry when spoken is the form that fuses the arts of all parts of delivery and performance. It can make words a truly awesome power to wield, and nowhere is this more so than in the theatre.

### Crafting oracy

Not very long ago, about four centuries or a dozen generations back, when most could not read, the written word was something to be feared, squatting on the doorstep of Magicke. Indeed, John Donne's power to speak for two hours extempore, employing great design, art, allusion and allegory off the top of his head must have made him seem demi-divine.

A little before Donne, we find Shakespeare at the height of his career: creating words at a rate of knots, exciting his audiences' minds with his invention, writing speeches for his actors that we're still unpacking today.

When Macbeth – a character wrestling with the idea of assassinating someone – first spoke the word ‘assassination’ it must have sent ripples through the crowd.

Back then, direct address monologues were an opportunity to problem-solve: when a character reaches a moment of grey, a question they can’t answer themselves, they used the audience as a sounding-board. Shakespeare’s words were meant, designed, fabricated to be

spoken: it’s in their DNA. His works are Plays, not Reads.

The words Shakespeare wove must have sparkled in the air, cooking the juices of our evolutionary brain up nicely in preparation for the muscle our imaginations would need for Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde (both famed orators of their own works), which carried us through to be ready for the quiet bounds of Charlie Chaplin’s Silence.

Distill even further, and the plays of Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett feature sequences of written words which only really ever make sense when

performed. They took us ever closer to the spoken word in writing, where the difference between a beat, a pause, and a silence can separate life from death in the hands of the right speaker. These masters of the oratorial craft needed actors armed to the teeth with an arsenal made up of the vocal equivalents of every punctuation mark right down to the interrobang.

### Shakespeare, in performance

In his works, Shakespeare, more so than any other theatre writer, provides an arena in which younglings can demonstrate an ability to play, with language as their play-fellow. They may explore the art of persuasion, without having to test that ability – merely demonstrate it. The doing it is sometimes enough.

Judging the ESU’s Performing Shakespeare Competition over the last few years, my fellow judges and I have discovered a trove of delights that come from asking a youngling to learn some Shakespeare, and stand, knees shaking, in front of a supportive, fascinated, fastidious, familial and friendly audience.

Setting aside the element of competition, we share in the joy they feel from a pure celebration of the art of words when spoken, with a

script provided by the man we hold in highest regard for sheer quality of dramatic speech.

The spoken word can – far more so than images – transport you to a different realm, suspending your disbelief so that the ground beneath you is no longer the place you just walked to; you’ve tripped beyond the veil, into a world created by the speaker.

When learning to write, I read my pieces out loud before submitting them to the mercies of Publishing. You’ll find out if it still makes sense, my father told me.

### Stage-time

My own powers of fluent vocal expression came through wrapping my tongue and teeth around other people’s words, having to rehearse the somersaults and flip-flops of strange collocations in a theatre.

The first slow, careful school plays (determined to make the biblical First Shepherd’s line: ‘Look, over there, we don’t need the light from the fire’ shine as brightly as the star we were supposing to see) gave way to amateur dramatics as fast as the rat-a-tat-tat of the *Bugsy Malone* gang’s ‘We-coulda-been-anything-that-we-wanted-tuh-be’.

Then, after playing around with these oratory trinkets, I began the ascent of what turned out to be a very tall mountain, stumbling over the rocks and pitfalls of Ariel’s ‘You are three men of sin’ speech, after I was cast in *The Tempest*.

Before I acted Shakespeare for the first time in front of audience, his writing made little sense to me, and I took no joy from his work. If some combinations of words and phrases are simply built for the spoken word and beg to be said out loud then, in the same breath, they beg for ears to hear them too.

That first performance changed my life, and with time I allowed myself to stand under the Shakespearean waterfall, working out how to let the words flow over and through me in the same way as, after days of falling off, you finally ‘allow’ a surfboard to carry you back to the beach.

A few years after this eye-ear-mouth-opening experience, I found myself faced with the following line from *Twelfth Night*, in my professional stage debut. After Orsino’s famous ‘If music be the food of love, play on’ speech comes the nearly as immortal ‘Will you go hunt,

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‘The spoken word can – far more so than images – transport you to a different realm, suspending your disbelief so that the ground beneath you is no longer the place you just walked to; you’ve tripped beyond the veil, into a world created by the speaker’



my Lord?', as Orsino's servant Curio tries to offer distraction from his master's love-anguish. I agonised over how to deliver that line:

1. Frustration: *Will you go hunt my Lord?* (Probably inappropriate to be frustrated)
2. Pointed: *Will you go hunt my Lord?* (As opposed to who?)
3. Strong: *Will you go hunt my Lord?* (By himself? Like telling a child to go play? Inappropriate)
4. I've got an idea: *Will you go hunt my Lord?* (as opposed to moping around wishing for Olivia perhaps? Not bad)
5. Possessive: *Will you go hunt my Lord?* (Showing allegiance: but a bit possessive. And, the play is not called *Twelfth Night* or *Orsino's Man's Love for Orsino*)
6. *Will you go hunt my Lord?* (Instead of calling him Orsi?)

Eventually, I asked one of the lead actors for his advice in the car park of Plymouth Theatre Royal, a few days before the play opened. Hilton stared down at the floor, then squinted up at me.

**H:** Well, it's a question, isn't it?

**Me:** Yeah.

**H:** So... ask the question. *Will you go hunt my Lord?*  
Just ask the question.

Hilton walked away, and I stared at the space where he was, slack-jawed.

Best acting lesson I've ever learnt. The simplicity. That's the problem with Shakespeare, and learning to speak in public in general. Oftentimes, because we practise on things that are considered Literature, and Poetry, or that are written in Iambic Pentameter, or simply because it's SHAKESPEARE, it can feel so tricky to understand one doesn't dare speak it out loud. It looks so compact on the page, and it becomes too easy to lose yourself in a maze of over-analysis, and not bother.

The simplicity of the note, 'Just ask the question' is one I pin to the inside of my head whenever I realise I'm working too hard.

### Fluently speaking

Shakespeare taught me about the simplicity of the spoken word, and the extra power words can have when you lend them your voice. That compact structure – whether it be due to the rules of grammar or the framework of poetry – doesn't have to be restricting, but can instead be liberating.

Actors like nothing more than a great character with chewy words, fast dialogue and speeches expressing big, important thoughts, even if that thought is nothing more than a line, a word, a pause. That's something Pinter taught me as a speaker, and Shakespeare later too, with his metrical gaps – the power of a silence, that stillness during speech can make a listener's heart leap.

Learning how to perform Shakespeare has been half the battle in my personal fight for oracy. Speaking fluently, to topic, without notes and for an exact dollop of time was something I saw my father do when I was seven years old. It had a huge effect on me, swinging my legs off a cushioned chair, as he swung his legs sitting on a table in a lecture theatre in Japan.

Ever since, I have learnt to do as he did: speak without notes – and never behind a lectern; both seemed things to bury myself into or hide behind, and convey different subconscious messages to an audience.

I think about the type of audience I'll be speaking to. I carefully choose my clothes and decide whether to shave or not. I wear a fob watch, too. As well as being an affectation, it reminds me that in the 1600s an hour was kept, and time-keeping was a looser affair. To a modern audience, glimpsing a wrist watch looks like I'm bored; glancing at the time on my phone looks like I'm checking my messages; but a fob watch tells your audience you're clocking how much time you have left with them.

The powers of improvised rhetoric I've gained from playing in the theatre now allow me now to adapt my speeches to the particular type of space that I'm in, to answer questions shortly or in detail, and I can turn my attention, while talking, to consider how much time I have left, which parts of a point I might then need to cut, and whether a poignant point or a joke will win this particular audience over.

These are skill sets you learn from time on the stage, where every slightest gesture tells a story. Safely nestled in the playwright's words, protected from any improvised creation, from the necessity of grammatical accuracy or articulatory fluency, you can freely develop these skills. First you learn by rote, and then you have to learn all over again, as the adrenaline wave of the lights and the audience sends you crashing off the surfboard.

Theatre can provide the basic tenets, the playground and practice for oracy. Indeed, oracy demands an understanding of drama, a craft of the stage, an understanding of your fellow human when clumped together into that unruly crowd, an audience, that, were they not sitting, can ever so quickly become a mob.

Without drama, I would be dissolute. Without theatre, I would be deaf. Without oracy, I truly would be mute. But, very probably, a mime.



**DEBRA KIDD**  
Author, Consultant

Debra Kidd has worked in education for over 20 years, teaching children from the ages of four right through to post-graduate Master's students. She has worked in both mainstream and special settings. She is an Associate for the Royal Society of Arts and for Independent Thinking Ltd. Her first book, *Teaching: Notes from the Frontline* was published in 2014, her second, an adaptation of her doctoral thesis, *Becoming Mobius* was published in early 2015. She is a columnist for *Teach Primary* and a regular writer for *Teach Secondary*. She is a passionate advocate for the arts and works frequently for the International Schools' Theatre Association and is the co-founder and organiser of Northern Rocks – one of the largest teaching and learning conferences in the UK.

## ORACY AND TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM

**'She had lost the art of conversation but not, unfortunately, the power of speech.'**

George Bernard Shaw

In 2014 a revolution happened in education. It didn't make the national news. It may not even have been the subject of conversation in staff rooms. But it was a revolution nonetheless. The UK government watchdog for education, Ofsted, announced that it would no longer judge teaching and learning with a preferred 'teaching style' in mind. The decision was a victory for campaigners who had long argued that there should be no fixed idea of what constituted outstanding teaching – that the proof should be in the pudding as it were and that teaching could be done effectively in a number of ways. It was an argument for the 'Bananarama Principle,' coined by the Sutton Trust and based on the lyrics of the 80s girl band, Bananarama: 'it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it.'

One of the biggest bones of contention at this time was the perception that 'teacher talk' was bad and did not allow pupils to develop their own talk and thinking. This assumption led to the belief that the less a teacher said, the better, and this belief was reflected in many Ofsted reports. But teacher talk is a vital component of teaching and learning and, as with many things, it's not so much about how much you talk, but how effectively you communicate. From questioning to scaffolding explanations, the use of conversation in conveying and consolidating meaning and content to children is essential. You would think it would form a major part of teacher training provision. But oddly, it doesn't.

In fact, talk seems to be one of those teacher skills that people simply assume comes naturally. It doesn't. Teacher talk is highly complex and sophisticated. The audiences that teachers need to communicate with are similarly complex – speaking with pupils, parents, other teachers, managers and external bodies requires shifts in language, tone and knowledge. Rarely do you see teacher training sessions dedicated to the ways in which our speech patterns might shift according to our audience. Rarely do you see sessions dedicated to good explanations and the importance of articulacy. Time, of course, is a factor, but I think also there is still an assumption that language comes naturally and that it need not be explicitly taught. This is too simplistic an assumption and I believe there are some guiding principles

that would make the life of a teacher and the experiences of the people he or she encounters in the course of their professional lives much more productive.

In this chapter, I separate the main audiences that professional conversation might involve and explore how, if you are aware of how you use your language, you can become not only a more effective teacher, but a more successful professional in terms of the networks and relationships you build.

### Teacher to child

The perception that teacher talk was bad came from research into the ineffectiveness of traditional teacher talk – what has been labeled as IRE – Initiation – Response – Evaluation. This limited form of teacher/child interaction is sometimes referred to as ‘guess what’s in the teacher’s head’ and may go like this:

**Teacher:** What is the capital of France? (2 seconds – choose a pupil with their hand up)

**Pupil:** Paris

**Teacher:** Good. Now Paris is the capital of France, it is built around the River Seine and has a population of.....

You can see from the example above that the pupil has little agency. They either know or they don’t. And what happens in that exchange is that while the teacher continues with information, the child who answered the question is neither thinking nor listening. They are either awash with relief, or if they got it wrong, mortification. They are distracted by the pressure of a question that did little in terms of getting them to think or articulate and instead simply required speedy recall. What if this was the conversation?

**Teacher:** What do most capital cities have in common in terms of their locations? (leave some thinking time – perhaps some paired discussion)

**Pupil:** They’re near good transport links?

**Teacher:** I wonder. Do the transport links come before or after the city is established?

**Pupil:** Oh, I don’t know.

**Teacher:** What might you need in order to have good transport links?

**Pupil:** Perhaps be near the sea or a river?

**Pupil 2:** Or flat land where roads can be built – like in a valley?

**Teacher:** Let’s look at an example – the capital of France... let’s see what we can discern from its geographical location.

In the first example, we have the teacher as the holder of the knowledge, giving it out in bite-sized chunks and occasionally stopping to allow a pupil to show what they already know. There is little agency or responsibility with the child. In the second the teacher also needs to have knowledge. But they have also thought how to use their knowledge to elicit deeper responses from the children, who are not allowed to jump off the hook without some careful thought. And while the example being studied might be Paris, the teacher has equipped the children with a series of questions that could be applied to any human settlement. They have used their talk to scaffold a knowledge schema in which human and physical geography interact and which can be applied to other contexts. This is one way in which sophisticated teacher talk can be helped to develop more sophisticated pupil talk. But there are many others.

Sometimes, the concept and content are such that no amount of eliciting will draw out the information you need. Input is required. This may be because the content is difficult or abstract or because the danger of misconception is high and careful scaffolding is required to ensure that pupil’s understanding is sufficient. The quality of teacher explanation at this point is vital. But teacher explanation is more than simply taking what you know out of your head and pouring it into the heads of others. In order to get across what you want to, you need to know how human beings receive, interpret and retain information. The need for pedagogical knowledge is as important as the need for subject specific knowledge.

I was once observed teaching and the observer told me that the quality of my teacher explanations was excellent. So much so that they asked me if I’d mind running some staff training on it. I declined the offer. I wasn’t being difficult, but I genuinely didn’t know what to say. I didn’t understand what I was doing and had no idea how I’d be able to explain to others what it was I had done. It took years for me to analyse my own talk and in the process to refine it. What I realised, eventually, was that there were patterns in the way I communicated what I wanted to teach

that seemed to be effective, and the more I read about cognitive science, the more I realised that there was evidence of their effectiveness.

- I told lots of stories.
- I used analogy.
- My talk was very gestural.
- I had a clear idea of what the main message of a lesson was and which key words or terms I wanted pupils to remember.
- I would use visual and mnemonic techniques to hook key terms onto.
- I never dumbed down my language but explained what challenging words meant.
- I would ensure that pupils practiced and put into action what they had learned, that they were held accountable for demonstrating their learning in terms of outcome and that they had clear, evaluative, ongoing verbal feedback.

Let's just take two aspects of the list above: story and gesture. We know from cognitive science that stories are 'psychologically privileged' in the human mind in terms of forming memory. Willingham summarises this in terms of the four Cs – Causality, Complications, Conflict and Character. When these four elements are in place, children are far more likely to recall information than when they receive the same information in expository form. If we were to return to our capital cities lesson, we might then see how these elements might work – the presence of a river creates causality. The fight for survival creates opportunities for both conflict and complications (as might events such as natural disasters, flooding and so on) and the presence of human characters places the geographical context into one in which emotions and empathy come into play. All in all, telling and creating the story of the origins of cities might well prove to be far more memorable than being

told the simple, cold facts. Another study into the teaching of science in 2012 supports the idea that teaching information in story mode led to more positive engagement and retention of the key knowledge required. There is no doubt that the human mind is tuned into responding to and remembering stories and using these in your teaching is one way of capitalising on teacher talk.

The teacher as storyteller now

**'The teacher as storyteller now becomes more important than simply the teacher as conveyer of information. A story takes the unique position of engaging both hearts and minds, or as Brecht put it, combining "the intelligence of thought and feeling"'**

becomes more important than simply the teacher as conveyer of information. A story takes the unique position of engaging both hearts and minds, or as Brecht put it, combining 'the intelligence of thought and feeling'. And to do this, a storyteller uses a variety of techniques to get their message across. Tone and intonation, pace and pause, volume and variance. And gesture.

Susan Goldin-Meadow has undertaken much research into the importance and significance of gesture in classroom interactions. She identifies not only how children will begin to articulate their understanding of concepts through gesture, but how effective teachers use gesture to help to reinforce and convey meaning. The interaction between word and movement is significant. She posits the idea that there are two forms of working memory – one which deals with the linguistic and the other which deals with the spatial. To gesture and explain at the same time therefore reduces cognitive load and allows more information to be stored and processed. Her research suggests that teacher's hand movements and expressions are significant elements of their talk and their capacity to explain effectively to children. And similarly, their ability to tune into and interpret the gestures of children is a key part of assessing their understanding in order to target and guide further questioning and task setting. All of which suggests that verbal and gestural communication between an adult and a child is always going to trump the text book or computer as a source of information. There is a reason that teachers have not yet been replaced by technology.

It's clear that effective teacher talk is linked to deep understanding of pedagogy, a commitment to keeping up to date with research and in the relationships between an adult and a child. It's part of our professional duty to think carefully and clearly about how we articulate what it is we want children to learn and how in turn, we attend to the need to develop articulacy in the child. But the role of oracy and teacher professionalism extends way beyond the classroom.

### Teacher to parent

Engaging hearts and minds is a diplomatic minefield when it comes to communicating with parents and as a profession, we often get this difficult relationship wrong. Whether it's through fear or defensiveness or sheer exhaustion, there are many examples of teacher/parent communication breakdowns which make for uncomfortable reading. Here's one occasion I got it really wrong. I was lucky not to be sacked for it. It took place over the telephone – I had sent a letter home with dates of drama exams on it. The date clashed with a family holiday

that the parent had booked. She called to demand I change the date of the exam.

**Parent:** You'll have to change the exam date, we've had this holiday booked for ages.

**Me:** I can't change the date of the exam I'm afraid. There is an external examiner and 94 other pupils to consider. You really shouldn't have booked a holiday in term time.

**Parent:** We have proper bloody jobs – we can't take all the holidays you get. This is the only date we can have.

**Me:** That's a shame, I suppose you'll have to leave her behind. Is there a relative she can stay with?

**Parent:** We're not leaving her behind! This is our family holiday.  
(*Her tone is getting a little hysterical now*)

**Me:** The date of the exam is fixed. The time of the exam is fixed. She's either there or she's not in which case she'll pass or she'll not. It seems to me that one of us has your child's interests at heart here, and it's not you.

*The mother slams the phone down on me. Her child misses and fails her exam.*

Now I know I had the moral high ground. But I was wrong. I did two things that no teacher should ever do, even if they think they are justified. I overtly challenged her competence as a parent, which can only ever mean all channels of communication are now shut down. And secondly I used language as power to make her feel inferior. I made my sentences more formal. I used patronising phrases 'I'm afraid' to place myself in a position of superiority. I emotionally manipulated her. Everything I did served to make her feel bad, to create entrenched positions and ultimately to ensure that her daughter failed an exam, which as it happens was one of the only ones she was likely to have passed. The shame of it still keeps me awake at night, 13 years later.

What else might I have done? Shown some empathy. Engaged on her terms. Offered proper solutions. Praised her child and talked up her chances of doing really well. Offered her a way out where she didn't lose face or see the situation as a 'them and us' scenario. I know she shouldn't have booked a term time holiday. But perhaps I could have put information about practical examinations out earlier? Perhaps I

could have written to parents at the beginning of the year stressing the likelihood of examinations taking place at that time of the year? The point is, that it is part of our professional duty sometimes, to get off our professional language high horses and seek to connect. High quality oracy is as much about moving down the formality scale as it is about moving up and knowing the appropriateness of shifting along the scale.

In 2000 MacLure et al found that parents' evenings and consultations were characterised by mutual suspicion and mistrust. She found that teachers tended to dominate conversations, filling time with jargon and institutional talk, leaving little time for parents to respond. Parents finding ways into the conversations were deemed to be pushy by teachers who felt their professionalism was being tested. Parents on the other hand felt talked down to, patronised and that there was little opportunity to alter the perceptions that a teacher might hold about their child. MacLure spoke of the need for teachers to be explicitly trained in how to conduct fruitful two-way conversations with parents, but to date, this still isn't a feature of most teacher training. Time slots are short. Teachers feel compelled to give clear information and are fearful of confrontation in what is often a public space and for any parent, a conversation about their child is emotionally charged. There are ways that teachers can use techniques to help to mitigate some of these difficulties.



'High quality oracy is as much about moving down the formality scale as it is about moving up and knowing the appropriateness of shifting along the scale'

- Don't assume that parents will understand all the jargon and acronyms associated with education and never use them to hide behind. Explain every term as a matter of course.
- Start your conversation with a humane ice breaker – whether as simple as 'it's lovely to meet you' or a comment on the weather – show you are a human being who is open and welcoming.
- Ask the parent what their perception of their child's progress and level of engagement is. Do they enjoy school/your subject? Show you are open to challenge. If they tell you their child is bored in your lessons, simply smile, say 'it is a challenge bringing some of this content to life, but I'd better find a way to do it – I can't have them being bored!' Even if you're fuming and have spent the last year practically juggling and walking on tightropes to entertain them, show that you can take things on the chin. Alternatively you could show how well you understand how kids learn. 'Hmm, that's a worry – no child learns when they're bored. I need to find out whether he's really bored or

just struggling – often children use the word bored to mean that they don't understand and are floundering. I'm glad you've told me. You're modelling being a professional and you're showing that you care about their child. You need to bring this way of thinking to every possible challenge. How might you respond to a challenge about the homework you set, the detentions you've issued, a perceived lack of challenge? Do they have a point? Can you always explain why you do what you do without being defensive?

- Know the child. Know what they can do, what they need to improve. Have clear, simply explained solutions and ideas for parents to develop at home so they feel like partners in their child's learning.
- Keep in touch. Parents get upset when they hear, halfway through the year, that there is a problem with their child and this is the first they knew of it.
- Focus on positives – find ways of communicating with parents throughout the year to acknowledge their child's achievements – either phone calls or praise postcards/emails. Establishing strong, fair and positive relationships with parents reaps dividends in all sorts of ways.
- Keep an eye on your body language – keep your gestures open and relaxed. Remain friendly. Our knowledge of mirror neurons shows that human beings will read and mirror each other's moods. When you are aware of this, you can set a positive mood and reassure the person speaking with you.

### Teacher to teacher

Professional conduct and relationships feature highly in the teaching standards guidance for all countries and yet these relationships often break down due to power structures, stress and accountability measures. We often see managers speaking of teachers with language that is built around a deficit model we would recognise as being damaging in the classroom. We are adept at acknowledging behavior management strategies that seek to understand that a class should not be characterised by a small number of disruptive pupils, yet too often we hear managers describing the whole of their staff in such ways. At a meeting of senior managers in 2014 I watched as around the table these statements were issued in response to the question 'what are your development focus points for next year?'

'Our staff can't...'

'Our staff won't...'

'The problem with our staff is...'

Oracy in relation to teacher professionalism is as much to do with wisdom as it is articulacy. Deciding what to say, how to say it, when to say it and to whom is important. Knowing when to be silent matters as much as speaking clearly. Effective oracy depends on being able to step back, observe, see the bigger picture and realise when your own pressures and biases are impacting on your perception. Balance matters. It is entirely unprofessional to use language to control and manipulate others, be they colleagues, children or parents. But the temptation to do so is great.

We don't have good role models in this respect. Michael Gove's terms of reference for the profession as 'enemies of promise' and 'The Blob' set an undesirable tone in which rhetoric and the appeal of the catchphrase overrode good sense and respect. It severed relationships with the people he needed to enact his reforms. As professionals we need to ensure that we don't use the same techniques to undermine and control those we work with and this goes both ways. Let's take for example how references to an external body are often used to justify our actions. What do the following statements have in common?

'We need to do this for Ofsted.'

'You need to do this for the exam.'

In both examples, an external body or organisation is being used as a level to manage behaviour either from a pupil or member of staff. It allows something unpopular or unenticing to be fed to the receiver of the statement while placing blame elsewhere. Ofsted's attempts in recent years to burst some of the 'we need to do this for Ofsted' myths shows that in many cases, headteachers and senior managers are using the organisation to enact policies that they simply desire. In the second example, the motivation may be more well intentioned – a teacher trying to prepare a child for an exam. The problem is that research shows that knowledge gained for a test tends not to transfer to proximal contexts (Wylie and Wiliam, 2006) and so it is far better to engage the pupil in understanding the function and purpose of the knowledge



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beyond the constraints of an exam. In both cases though, the statements allow for oracy underpinned by explanation and rationale to be replaced by systems of constraint and control. It is in effect a use of restricted speech code, characterised by Bernstein in the form of parents whose responses to their children's questions revolve around 'Just because!' without elaborating explanation, cause and consequence. If you need to explain to a colleague why you are doing what you are doing, you need to have good reasons for doing so. You need to employ the tools of oracy to bring people along. You need to be well informed and to know what underpins the action. You need to have considered and recognised that, in the words of the International Baccalaureate mission statement, 'that other people, with their differences, can also be right' and to be willing to listen and to compromise or persuade. All of these take some mental effort and time, but they pay dividends in terms of developing strong, mutually respectful professional networks. 'Because I say so,' is rarely an effective argument.

These may seem like obvious things, but poor oracy in the workplace is the cause of much conflict and stress. Similarly, members of staff who default to personal attacks, constant complaining, emotive manipulation and sulking, rarely achieve anything. Learning to consider both points of view, understanding where others are coming from, arming yourself with information, making the time for a considered conversation and thinking about the impact of your words on others will always pay dividends.

As we move into a phase of Ofsted inspection in which the quality of conversation between professionals is considered to be important, the confidence of teachers and managers to professionally articulate their context and rationale is vital. As one headteacher said to me when explaining why she was implementing a whole school teacher action research programme:

'It's important that they know why they do what they do and that they have the confidence to articulate it. It's important for our own professional development, but it's also important so they are never cowed by an inspector – that they can explain clearly and show that they have good reasons for the decisions they make.'

### Conclusion

We hear frequently the idea posited that the digital natives we teach will no longer need us in the future – that the Google generation will have all the knowledge they ever need at their fingertips. But this is to miss one of the most important aspects of what it is to be human. We

are social animals. We respond to each other; we seek to understand each other and ourselves; we suffer greatly from loneliness and isolation when kept apart from others; we often need someone with experience, wisdom and knowledge to help us to access that which we seek to understand; we have an inherent need to hear and engage with and create stories. We need to communicate.

A human world without oracy, whether spoken, signed or both, is a lonely world. As professionals, working in a multi modal and complex power system, we need to be finely tuned to the impact our words have on others – whether their intention is to educate, persuade or discover. We need to pay more attention to this in our training and ongoing staff development. We need to become articulate, humane and measured in our interactions with others. Only then will be able to claim the title 'professional.'



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## ORACY AND THINKING SKILLS

### Introduction

Human nature is such that, unlike many other species, we are born with relatively few instincts 'hard-wired'. Instead, our evolutionary heritage has given us a flexible and powerful brain which we can use to learn about the world – and which we also have to learn to use. 'Thinking skills' is the term now commonly used to refer to the set of cognitive abilities we develop, which represent a toolkit of methods for getting different kinds of mental work done. It is becoming widely accepted that one of the main functions of education should be to help children develop their thinking skills. There has been some resistance to this idea by descendants of Dickens's Mr Gradgrind, who believe that schools should concentrate on the transmission to students of canonical bodies of factual knowledge, and that any focus on the development of skills will distract teachers and students from this task. However, setting the development of thinking skills against the acquisition of a knowledge base is to create a false dichotomy, because giving attention to one should not preclude attending to the other. Indeed, they should be linked (Rotherham and Willingham, 2009). Learning to become a scientist, for example, obviously requires both content knowledge and the development of critical thinking skills.

### The relationship between thinking, language and social interaction

In recent years, research in psychology and education has led to some changes in the understanding of how children develop their cognitive skills. A key issue is the relationship between individual and social activity. For many years, the study of how children learn to solve problems or develop new understandings focused mainly on how, as individuals, they acquired strategies for making sense of the world through their direct experience of it. That perspective was largely derived from the influential work of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1970). In more recent times, the work of one of Piaget's contemporaries, the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) has provided the basis for a different perspective. Vygotsky proposed that children develop their understanding of the world, and many of their cognitive abilities, through interaction with the people around them. He pointed out that children do not typically encounter the physical world as isolated individuals; rather, they are born into an environment populated by people who they see and hear making sense of the world. That is, their experience is mediated by their observations of, and communications with, adults and other children. Vygotsky also gave

children's acquisition of language an important role in that sense-making process, arguing that language functions as both a cultural tool (whereby children can learn what others know and think) and a psychological tool (whereby children become able to use it to organise their own thinking). Moreover, he suggested that these two kinds of uses were integrated, so that children can use their interactions with other people to develop their own thinking skills by 'internalising' the ways they hear and see others making sense of experience. And as children become able to express their own ideas in words, adults can take account of what they say to offer guidance and feedback to assist children's learning. Therein lie the foundations of an effective education system. Vygotsky died in 1934, but in recent years research has provided much support for the 'socio-cultural' model of cognitive development that he proposed (Alexander, 2001; Daniels, 2001, 2008; van Oers *et al.*, 2008; Mercer & Howe, 2013).

### Different kinds of thinking skills

Some thinking skills may be quite specific, being relevant to solving particular types of problems, but some are more generalised. Three of these general kinds of thinking skills have been given particular attention by developmental psychologists in recent years: *metacognition*, *self-regulation* and *reasoning*. Metacognition means the ability to reflect upon one's own thinking processes, so as to review and evaluate plans and strategies which have been used and decisions which have been made. Self-regulation means the ability to monitor one's own processes of problem-solving, to control one's own urges and behaviours and redirect efforts in appropriate directions to achieve the goals being pursued. Reasoning is essentially the ability to use available evidence to assess competing explanations and to draw conclusions which can be justified on the basis of that evidence, and so inform subsequent action. Research has shown that the development of these skills is linked to children's successful achievement in school (Whitebread *et al.*, 2013). Children may vary considerably in terms of how skilled they are in these ways of thinking; but research has shown that teachers can promote the development of these thinking skills through providing the right kinds of guidance, instruction and learning activities (Hattie, Biggs & Purdie 1996; Whitebread & Pino Pasternak 2010; Dignath, Buettner & Langfeldt, 2008).

### Talk and the development of thinking skills

A key feature of the contemporary sociocultural perspective on the development of thinking skills, which reflects its Vygotskian origins,

is an emphasis on the close relationship between children's acquisition and social use of language and the development of their skills in learning and problem-solving. It has been known for some time that the quality of pre-school children's language experience correlates highly with their subsequent academic achievement (Hart & Risley, 1995), and that correlation can at least partly be explained by the sociocultural model of the relationship between *intermental* (social) and *intramental* (psychological) activity. This predicts that children who are regularly involved in reasoned discussions in the home are more likely to become effective at reasoning on their own than children who lack such conversational experience. Similarly, by internalising the processes of reflective discussion and the co-regulation of joint activities through talk, children may become better at self-regulating their own activity and reflecting upon their own thought processes.

That children's educational futures should be determined before they even enter schools seems tragic; but fortunately that is not necessarily the case. Children can transcend their destinies if schools provide the kind of experience and tuition which will develop their use of language for self-expression, reasoning, reflection and self-regulation. This is one reason why oracy skills deserve the kind of attention traditionally given to literacy and numeracy. (The term 'oracy' was coined by Andrew Wilkinson (1965) to help give spoken language skills a similar status to those concerned with written language.) That oracy is not considered as important – which is certainly the case for the current National Curriculum for English schools – seems to reflect the ignorance and prejudice of policy makers, who typically regard talk in the classroom as a mere distraction from more important matters, and who insist that 'children naturally learn to talk; they do not naturally learn to read' (Gove, 2013). It is not as though we lack effective ways of teaching oracy skills (See for example, Dawes, 2008, 2012; School 21, 2016). Although it is intrinsically difficult, we also have ways of assessing children's skills in using spoken language, and of monitoring the progress they make (University of Cambridge, 2016; Communication Trust, 2016). Oracy skills are already taught in the schools where the



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wealthiest parents in Britain pay to send their children. However, the oracy curricula of elite, private academies do nothing to help promote social equality and mobility in a country like the UK. Teaching children how to use the spoken language is not only important because it contributes to the development of their thinking skills; effective ways of communicating through speech have high social value, and learning them can help children participate more successfully in society. Education in those skills should not be confined to children of the upper classes. For all these reasons, oracy deserves to be given a place in every school curriculum equal to that of literacy and numeracy, rather than being treated as their poor relation.

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## ORACY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

### A divide at the top

In late July 2016, we had the privilege of witnessing student oracy at its best. The World Schools' Debating Championships (WSDC) in Stuttgart provided a masterclass in oracy and rhetoric: crystal clarity and precision of language; the cut and thrust of on-the-spot responses; well-developed argument supported by knowledge; and the types of rhetorical flourish that any politician would be proud of. However, the WSDC has historically been a community dominated by the elite: students from the best private schools around the world, coming together to celebrate their skills and represent their countries as members of the educational *crème de la crème*.

Why is this the case? Debating, on the surface, seems like it should be the most democratic of activities. Surely all that is needed are opinions and the desire to share them? A student's educational and social background do not appear to impede either of these two things occurring – ask any teacher at Islington's Highbury Grove School about their students' willingness to engage in argument when it comes to homework, or whether Arsenal will win the league this year. Why then is this not being reflected at the elite level of oracy events and competitions, be these related to debating, public speaking, model UN or any other area? Channelling the natural dogmatism of teens into effective and impactful spoken communication has the potential not only to give students better access to a range of school experiences, but also to make a significant difference to their post-school choices and their ability to move beyond the circumstances that the accident of their birth placed them in. This essay will explore the benefits to social mobility that the effective teaching of oracy can bring, the barriers that currently exist which prevent this from being the norm across schools in the UK and how the effective use of 'oracy as intervention' could be an engine for social mobility.

### Oracy and social mobility

Oracy and spoken literacy have the potential to play a significant role in social mobility, but these tools are not currently utilised as well as they could, and should, be in schools. In fact, too often the opposite is



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true; the most privileged in society are given the power of words and language to enable them to succeed in life whilst others are left behind.

We were both educated in comprehensive schools: St Bonaventure's in West Ham and Heathmont College on the outskirts of Melbourne. These were by no means the most challenging of state school environments, but they did lack many of the privileges often associated with the educational elite. However, both schools placed a significant emphasis on debating. For both of us, failed sportsmen as we were, this provided an academic focus which gave space for the enjoyment of learning and provided skills which later allowed us to utilise the academic qualifications we gained and, pun intended, give them voice. Without this channel we would not only have been less likely to have gained the academic qualifications that we did but, more importantly, we would have been far less able to exploit these and to make them count.

Our experience is not unique – today there are students from a range of backgrounds who are benefiting from the opportunity to develop their communication skills through activities such as debating, or via targeted oracy teaching being provided by institutions such as School 21 in Newham and Highbury Grove. However, too many disadvantaged young people are still missing out on the opportunity to improve their attainment through the development of their oracy skills, a troubling problem given that attainment is one of the biggest barriers to social mobility. According to a recent Teach First report:

'Too many children from low income backgrounds fail to reach the minimum standard of five A\*-C grades at GCSE, including English and maths, and effectively find the university door shut for them by age 16. While over 60% of non-FSM (Free School Meal) pupils achieve this benchmark, fewer than one in three FSM pupils do the same. The gap is even starker at the higher grades at GCSE that

indicate a level of attainment likely to lead to the top A level grades required to access the most selective universities. The odds against averaging at least an A grade in English and maths are over four times as high for pupils from low income backgrounds, and over six times as high for achieving A\* in both English and maths.'

School 21 sees a clear link between this under attainment and verbal communication skills:

'In areas of deprivation 50% of children enter school with below-average speaking skills, a trend that is difficult to reverse. In fact, researchers have found that children who had normal non-verbal skills but a poor vocabulary at age 5 were at age 34 one and a half times more likely to be poor readers or have mental health problems and more than twice as likely to be unemployed than children who had broadly average language development at age 5.'

This is not a particularly new idea: as early as 2008, it was identified as an issue by Educational Psychologist, Dr Zoe Owen's work, which concluded that:

'Speech, language and communication are crucial to all children ... if a child does not benefit from early intervention, there are multiple risks which may become evident over a period of years – of lower educational attainment, of behavioural problems, of emotional and psychological difficulties, of poorer employment prospects, of challenges to mental health and in some cases, of a descent into criminality.'

For these individuals and institutions, bridging the attainment gap, increasing social mobility of pupils and developing oracy skills are all inextricably linked. Yet sadly, we have seen no wide-ranging approaches implemented at a national level to address this. Given this, when School 21's first GCSE cohort sit their exams in 2017, there will be many observers keen to see how they perform and whether that which we in the oracy community anecdotally hold to be true, i.e. that effective oracy skills can have a positive impact on wider attainment, is substantiated by a broader data set. This will in turn, hopefully, provide the impetus for a greater emphasis to be placed on oracy across school curricula.

More holistically, in an environment in which more and more students are leaving education with similar qualifications, the ability to bring something different to the table is becoming increasingly important. Expending resources solely based on the premise of giving students grades on a piece of paper ignores so much of the reality of the U.K. employment market. Not only is it more competitive than ever, at every



'In an environment in which more and more students are leaving education with similar qualifications, the ability to bring something different to the table is becoming increasingly important. A qualification certificate alone cannot convince an employer you are the right person for the job. A Grade 5 in English, on its own, does not guarantee client retention at your company'

'The odds against averaging at least an A grade in English and maths are over four times as high for pupils from low income backgrounds, and over six times as high for achieving A\* in both English and maths'

level, but it is also a market in which the ability to communicate effectively is becoming a hugely sought-after skill. In such a context, failing to equip our students with the ability to talk – and to do so effectively – risks leaving a significant number of young people behind. A qualification certificate alone cannot convince an employer you are the right person for the job. A Grade 5 in English, on its own, does not guarantee client retention at your company. Even if students are able to get a foot in the door, without the ability to communicate effectively, their ability to gain promotion is severely handicapped, leaving even those lucky enough to get into employment without the kind of income and training to move beyond the lower strata of the employment market.

However, social mobility is more than just the ability to gain, and to make progress within, employment. Broader social change requires that our young people are able to be part of the discussion about what social mobility means and what this looks like on the ground. As long as the discussion is about what ‘we’ (read: the socially mobile) should do about them (read: the less socially mobile), then the divide will never truly be bridged. A movement for social mobility necessitates that those who best understand the challenges and therefore possible ways around those challenges, be heard. This can only be done if educators provide the teaching and the space for these young people to develop the skills and confidence that will empower them to contribute.

### What might oracy-as-intervention look like?

For oracy to play a major role in increasing social mobility there needs to be a shift in both focus and resource allocation, away from the disproportionate emphasis on examinations at KS4 and league tables and towards a more holistic skills-based approach, which provides students with the ability to confidently and articulately communicate. An effective programme of teaching oracy will, as well as developing the necessary associated skills (whether this be through explicit skill development, for example rhetoric lessons, or by embedding it within a broader curriculum), will also ‘legitimise’ oracy and effective speech to students, parents and even teachers.

### So, what do such programmes look like?

First, they are systematic and do not rely on the vagaries of individual teachers or departments:

any initiative that hopes to have wide-reaching impact must adopt a genuine whole-school approach. Students must experience and value oracy in the way they do reading or writing – i.e. as part of their daily school diet, in every subject, every year. Through this approach, they

come to appreciate the importance of oracy and thus buy into the idea of working to improve these skills. At Highbury Grove School, this systemisation has been achieved through the creation of a ‘rhetoric roadmap’ – a school-wide plan of where and when oracy will be taught and embedded in to the curriculum across every subject.

Second, they are not optional. Speech and oracy are too often treated by schools as being the preserve of the most able – debate clubs targeted at the high-achieving students being a classic example. This means that those who most need these skills are precluded from accessing them. It was this thinking that lay behind Highbury Grove School’s ‘Project Soapbox’, which is a compulsory programme, requiring students to make a three minute persuasive speech in front of an authentic audience.

Third, they celebrate the ability to use speech effectively as an achievement, and present this as a skill that must be worked at. By setting standards for effective speech and rewarding and celebrating the achievements of those that reach these levels, oracy gains credibility in the minds of students and parents alike and becomes something that students strive to get better at. Without this approach, the risk is that problems that plagued the old speaking and listening components of the English Language GCSE, when schools tended to focus on completing set tasks, rather than using these as opportunities to develop skills, will be repeated.

Unfortunately, there is still widespread resistance to the idea of providing of space within the curriculum for the teaching of oracy. Whether this be related to a belief in the primacy of the ‘content’ of a given subject, or simply a failure to recognise the potential importance of this skill in increasing social mobility, there is much work to be done. Our experiences though, have told us that we should in fact be ruthlessly focused on ensuring that all young people, irrespective of their backgrounds, are able to communicate effectively in a spoken form. Achieving this through the school curriculum, will give the social mobility engine a much needed turbo boost.



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## THE AGE OF RHETORIC

Rhetoric, the art of persuasive speaking or writing, is all around us. When you tweet, post an update on Facebook or broadcast a YouTube video, you have the potential to reach more people than most had access to in the past. Everything we communicate via the Internet is potentially part of a global conversation. It is said that due to this accessibility to information we are living in a post-truth age, an age where anything can be said and be deemed to be true. People have tried to explain events such as Donald Trump reaching great heights in the American presidential election and the British Brexit campaign as being examples where facts took second place to gut feelings; American comedian Stephen Colbert's concept of *truthiness*, the idea that something not true can feel as though it is, addresses this phenomenon. I could argue it was ever thus; in the 18th century the philosopher David Hume wrote how reason is the slave to emotion.

This 'age of rhetoric', will be dangerous if every opinion is treated as equally valid and feelings enslave us all. Emotion is vital to engage with but so is reason. The problem of accepting that we live in a post-truth age means that we are more likely to accept that the opinion of a celebrity can be valued more than the expert's, and that a reality TV star can reach millions of people with one tweet but if challenged about his opinions he can encourage a twitter mob to silence his critics. Even an internet search doesn't necessarily uncover truth. This means that amongst all the noise it is difficult to discern the difference between fact and fiction, a problem that is compounded for a novice, especially if a child. In a 'connected' world what is to stop one person's truth being equal to another? If every opinion is similarly sacred the purveyors of exciting rhetoric can get away, literally, with murder. The problem is not new, it reminds us of 'empty rhetoric', where persuasive speech is divorced from critique and 'truth'.

Instead of reinforcing a post-truth age, teachers should insist on pursuing wisdom by challenging and critiquing instances when their pupils are guilty of lazy thinking. Ill thought through dialogue, and emotive utterances, which bear no resemblance to truth, should not be encouraged in the classroom. In an educational institution, it is our duty to examine thoughts and ideas to find out if there is an element of truth to them. If schools were to abandon the pursuit of truth then they abandon the very need for schooling itself.

The problem is exemplified with the idea that teachers should respect the opinion of everyone in their classrooms equally. No they shouldn't. In order to teach children well, we do not need to ask them

their opinion, as it counts for very little in a classroom debate if they have little knowledge or experience of the topic being discussed. We need to develop the conversational or dialogic classroom in a way that examines argument by teaching children about different viewpoints. We need to get them to refrain from judgment until they have studied all sides of a debate. Pupils should be taught the importance of accepting their emotional response whilst at the same time trying to be as objective as possible and developing empathy towards other points of view as well as the ability to argue eloquently. It is enormously helpful to get children to argue on both sides of a debate in order to get them to think about how an argument is constructed so that, in the end, they might wish to go about demolishing an alternative view but they do it from the point of view of deep respect and understanding as to why that view might be held.



‘Education should be about exploring what it is to be human, a continuing process, making and remaking oneself and one’s society’

We should initiate young people to take part in the great conversation and in order to establish a deep engagement with this conversation pupils need to be taught about the history of thought, of argument, of philosophy and politics. It is not enough to teach them about the workings of Parliament, get them to

make a speech or two and take part in a mock election or represent their form on the second-rate school council. Pupils need to be taught through a vibrant curriculum, to see the interplay of arguments, thoughts and ideas. Teachers need to select texts that juxtapose arguments when set against another judiciously selected text, or ensure that, where possible, the topics, texts and works covered are taught in a way that unlocks the arguments within. This, if you like, is a canonical approach to teaching, great texts presented in a way to create great dialectic. So much can be drawn from *Antigone* about the individual versus the state and about natural law vs ‘the’ law of man. In Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* one can explore: ‘Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall’ (Act 2, Scene 1) and other ideas. Edmund Burke can be explored alongside Thomas Paine, leading on to Wollstonecraft’s ‘Vindication of the Rights of Men’ and ‘Vindication of the Rights of Women’. The entire history of the British Empire and colonialism should be studied in depth exploring the contradictions and difficulties that echo down the years.

This vision is far removed from current educational practice. The pursuit of various data and the desire to rise up the exam performance

tables results in a narrowing of the idea of education: teach kids knowledge, ensure kids retain knowledge, and find out how well they have retained said knowledge through high-stakes tests. This is very thin gruel. Education should be about exploring what it is to be human, a continuing process, making and remaking oneself and one’s society.

It is worrying that in the name of societal sensitivities that sometimes debates are avoided for reasons of political correctness with the excuse that ‘offence’ might be triggered, but in the age of rhetoric the classroom should not be a safe space. Society will be stronger if children are able fully to take part eloquently and thoughtfully in the global conversation. Schools have a duty to give children the opportunity to become informed and wiser, pupils should be able to debate, think, and be ready to make the world their own. I hope they decide to shun the age of ‘empty rhetoric’ and, instead, ensure the age of rhetoric is one in which challenge and debate are the order of the day.

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[esu.org](http://esu.org)

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We would like to offer our sincere thanks to all the wonderful people who wrote chapters for this publication. Each contributor gave freely of their time in bringing their wisdom and insight to these pages and we are extremely grateful for both their generosity and their commitment to promoting the vital importance of oracy in education.



Speaking Frankly is a collection of essays by teachers, academics and educational thinkers on the importance of oracy in education.

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