Look Who's Talking Now

Getting students talking in a positive and constructive manner in tutorials

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Objectives

- To consider the value of getting pupils talking for cognition and learning

- To give some broad ideas on creating an environment conducive to contributions

- To try out some strategies/activities that you can use to get pupils expressing their views and contributing

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Why do we want to get pupils talking (particularly the quieter pupils)?

- Talking (often) = learning
- It helps you to accurately assess engagement and understanding, challenge and clarify where necessary
- Effective dialogue creates the space to consider topics in a different light

In your groups…

Tell us about a time that you tried to have a class discussion, as a teacher or student, but you were unsatisfied with what happened

- Why were you unsatisfied with the discussion?
- What do you think you could have done differently to improve the result?
- Why do you think the discussion developed in the way that it did?

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Why do we want students to talk?

Instrumental vs Intrinsic goodness

Intrinsic Goodness

- The kind of goodness that is **good within itself**
- This is the thing **we really want**
- The intrinsically good things are the things that we value for their own sake – many people value fulfilment, happiness, helping others, etc.

Instrumental Goodness

- This is the stuff that is **not good within itself**, but instead **helps us get to what we want**
- For most people, driving to their favourite restaurant isn't intrinsically good – unless they really enjoy driving! But it helps them get to the thing they enjoy intrinsically – eating delicious food.

The Hard Truth

- Getting pupils talking is not intrinsically good, it is just instrumentally good
- The intrinsic good that getting pupils talking serves is by **promoting learning**
- The important takeaway from this is that we are not looking for **just any kind of talking – we want the right kind of talking**
- Talking does not necessarily increase **learning** (Murphy et al, 2009)
- It's only a specific kind of talking that promotes **learning**, which is what we really want

Introverts and Extroverts

- A student might appear introverted because the learning environment in your classroom doesn't serve their learning needs. The appropriate response is for you to adjust your teaching practice to improve their learning, not give up because they're an 'introvert'.

- Not all 'quiet students' are the same.

- The goal is to set up a classroom environment such that every pupil feels comfortable engaging.

Students' learning needs

- It's important to be aware of students' particular learning needs
- This is both formally identified learning needs, but also different ways of learning
- Some pupils will have accessibility needs that you should find out about before tutorial one

Strategies and ideas

Dialogue in educational settings

- **Disputational Talk**, in which children try to defeat each other and be the winner, depends on an identification with a narrow and defended self-image where what is seen as 'self' is defined against others.

- **Cumulative Talk**, by contrast, depends on all in the group identifying with the group identity more than with their individual identity. They do not want to challenge each other since that might disrupt the harmony of the group. In cumulative thinking there is no incentive to challenge ideas or explore reasoning, instead people seek to agree with each other to maintain the feeling of belonging to the group.

- **Dialogic or Exploratory talk** however is characterized by openness and respect for difference while also developing criticality and conviction.

- G.H. Mead suggests that a 'reasonable person' is one who can adopt the view of the 'generalised other'. This suggests that being able to think for oneself is an important disposition to develop but there is also the need to take in the views of others. Our thinking is expanded not only by thinking for ourselves, but also by thinking with and through others.

Ground rules create a safe space for pupils to engage

- Some pupils are going to be keener to talk than others
- You can't rely on the 'natural environment' of the classroom to ensure that pupils feel enthusiastic about participating
- You can alter and improve the social environment of the classroom by setting **ground rules**
- The best way to make sure the rules work for yourself and your pupils is to **agree together** on what rules to put in place

Suggested Ground Rules

1. All relevant information is shared;
2. The group seeks to reach agreement;
3. The group takes responsibility for decisions;
4. Reasons are expected;
5. Challenges are accepted;
6. Alternatives are discussed before a decision is taken
7. All in the group are encouraged to speak by other group members.

(N. Mercer et al., 1999)

Suggested Versus Real Ground Rules

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Real Rules

1. Discuss things together. That means:
   I. ask everyone for their opinion,
   II. ask for reasons why,
   III. listen to people.
2. Be prepared to change your mind.
3. Think before you speak.
4. Respect other people's ideas—don't just use your own.
5. Share all the ideas and information you have.
6. Make sure the group agrees after talking

(N. Mercer et al., 1999)

Strategies for Conversation Management

- In choosing to build tutorials that use dialogic talk as a key learning method, your role as a tutor changes
- Instead of taking on the role of **lecturer**, standing at the front of the class and monologuing course content, you are acting in two ways:
  - Firstly as a **conductor**
  - Secondly as a **referee**.

Positive reinforcement

- Students respond really well to positive reinforcement

- If someone says something that moves the discussion along, or someone shares something, praise them for it

- This builds rapport with pupils and incentivises participation

Responsivity to student contributions

- Instead of working from a 'script' that dictates your interventions in the conversation, structure the conversation by responding to and building on student responses
- For example: "Peter brings up a great point about how there seems to be a link between the elevation of a place, and the kinds of plant species that are there. Does anyone have any ideas as to why this might be the case?"
- Tangents can be productive – so be flexible in deviating from your lesson plan if you spot an opportunity for learning

Assess prior knowledge and background information

- Find out the background knowledge that your students have, and 'hook on' to it to prompt and structure discussion.

- For example:
  - Tutor: Have any of you heard of the concept of 'dramatic irony' before?
  - Student: I think it's like, when it's raining on TV as a sad scene starts. We know something bad is about to happen.
  - Tutor: Great. Why do you think TV writers make it rain during a sad scene? In what way is this dramatic irony?

Encourage complete expression

- Often, when students participate in class, they express only part of their thoughts. When a student does this, use elicitation techniques to get the student to fill out their thought, such as:
  - Questions that ask pupils to provide more detail 'That's a great idea – can you explain your thinking?' 'You say this is true for x, do you think it's true for y too?'
  - Restatements – 'so it sounds like you are suggesting that x'
  - Invitations to expand – 'Tell me more about that'; 'how would you explain that to someone who'd never heard of this before and hadn't been in our tutorials?'

Be challenging, but non-threatening

- Create an atmosphere in which pupils feel comfortable saying things that have a high probability of being wrong
- Explain the nature of academic enquiry as being a practice in which we all have to risk being wrong
- As such, provide positive feedback when students say things that are incorrect, and applaud them for taking the risk:
  - Student: We could make the wires out of ceramic materials for our superconductor
  - Tutor: That is a really exciting thought! How do you think we should overcome the problem that ceramic materials are very brittle and hard to make into wires?
  - Student: I'm not sure.
  - Tutor: Don't worry – can anyone else help? Why might that be a problem?

Encourage students to communicate the basis of their thoughts

- Encourage reasoning, evidence, and consideration, instead of speculation.
- When a student gives a speculative answer, prompt them to provide their reasoning or basis of evidence.

- Student: I think that this disease is caused by a virus.
- Tutor: Really interesting idea! Why do you think this is the case?
- Student: Well, antibiotic treatments seem not to work.
- Tutor: This is really good evidence for your view. Well done.

Fewer "know-answer" questions

- Try not to play 'guess what's in the teacher's head' – ask questions that invite open responses and have multiple useful responses.

- This will make students more likely to engage and get them thinking in a deeper way about the course content.

- You can ask 'black and white' factual questions sometimes, but make sure you are only doing this to collect the necessary information to inform your teaching practice. With these questions it can be good to use a more open method such as mini whiteboards that tests everyone is at the same stage.

Applying these strategies to engage quieter pupils

Scenarios

1. One pupil is keen and talkative but in the first session, ends up talking so much that other pupils don't talk very much.

2. One pupil approaches you before the session and tells you that they want to participate in class but keep getting interrupted by other pupils.

3. A normally talkative group are quiet after a session in which you've introduced challenging new content.

4. A pupil tells you in the first session that they're not particularly interested in your subject, and is quiet from then on.

Group discussion

What actions could you take in your planning for this or the next tutorial?

What strategies discussed in this session do you think would be most effective?

How will you know if you're choices have been successful?

Closing Task

• Please share two takeaways from this session

  • What two things have you learned?

  • What two strategies could you incorporate into future teaching?

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