

"It is sad to relate that the history of formal schooling in this country shows literacy and oracy at enmity, a state of affairs which has persisted down to the present day.... As the concept of universal elementary education gradually emerged, it was seen in terms of the three Rs and Rhetoric was certainly not one of them....If pupils used their tongues it was not for spontaneous utterances, but in order to recite a piece of verse, or more likely a psalm or catechism learnt by heart.... That literacy, in the wide sense, is important is not open to doubt. What is questionable is the assumption that it is sufficient. This was precisely the question never asked. On the contrary twin buttresses were erected to make existing practice unassailable. These buttresses were the Theory of Grammar and the Theory of Literature. The Theory of Grammar held that the performance of a large number of grammatical exercises disciplined the mind and improved ability to write composition. Both these beliefs have been known to be false since the early 1900s. But this did not prevent the Theory filling text books and examination papers for the next sixty years, and leaving little time for the writing which is part of true literacy and even less for oral skills." (Andrew Wilkinson: Spoken English 1965)

Talk was shown the classroom door in the early nineties, after a very brief honeymoon, and has only been allowed back for short periods as long as it is well behaved and dressed as 'speaking and listening'. Andrew Wilkinson, who coined the word 'oracy' made it very clear in his seminal book 'Spoken English' that Rhetoric and Literacy have always been enemies. The new primary framework has now, perhaps, opened more windows for the development of talk. However, any centralising tendency in education is likely to be more than lukewarm about talk in the classroom. Arthur Hugh Clough summed up the same attitude in his poem on the modern version of the ten commandments:

Thou shalt not kill, But need not strive
Officiously to keep alive.

Valerie Coultas book on talk is primarily addressed to secondary English teachers, especially those who enjoy the challenge and lively contexts of inner

city classrooms, providing the teaching equivalent of white water rafting. She has a lot of experience of working with pupils whose reading and writing skills are weak, but who bring to the classroom enormous energy and a wealth of experience combined with the ability to creatively express themselves orally in many different languages and vernaculars. She provides lots of practical and well-tried ways in turning that talk towards a learning purpose rather than stifling it through demands for silent reading and writing. This is an ideal book for the inexperienced teacher who wants to make a difference. Although the strategies are designed for the secondary English classroom they transfer easily to other subjects, and to the primary classroom.

She provides useful ways of using pair work, group work, drama, jigsawing and information gap to enliven and clarify the most complex concepts. As well as providing a useful handbook for every teacher in every subject and every phase, she has written a lively, informative and well-referenced history of talk since Andrew Wilkinson invented the word 'oracy.'

I must declare an interest here. I was training teachers in Birmingham and teaching in a Smethwick comprehensive in 1965. Working with Andrew and pupils new to English set me on a course to promote talk in the classroom, devise ways for scaffolding it for bilingual learners and eventually establishing the Collaborative Learning Project in 1983. .

Valerie divides the history of talk into three stages. The creative period from 1965 to 1985 produced two reports, Plowden and Bullock, that put talk at the centre of learning and a host of books and projects that still have relevance today. She describes the interest and energy that teachers and researchers at the time put into putting talk at the centre of learning. The National Oracy Project set up in 1986 set a kind of official seal on this work, and took the work out of the cities and into rural schools.

However, official support was short lived. Although reports (Kingman and Cox) put talk at the centre of learning, the growing development around the measurement of standards and concern with measurable outcomes collided with the work on talk. The censoring of the LINC materials in 1991, the introduction of testing for reading and writing in 1993 and the refusal to extend the

groundbreaking work of the Oracy project, pushed talk into the background. It was too slippery, too creative, too argumentative to be easily tested, measured and weighed. The National Literacy Project, stopwatch in hand, would not provide time for talk. Instead of developing their talk through play, children have spent too much of their valuable talk time over the last ten years or more filling in word level worksheets. The only area where talk between teachers and pupil could develop: guided reading, was probably the least developed area promoted by the strategy. It needed the imaginative work of the London Institute on bookbanding to raise the quality of talk here.

As Valerie reminds us: "...it is time to reassert the creative value of pupil based collaborative talk, the social nature of the learning process, and place the needs of the child right at the centre of English teaching. This is important in all classrooms. It is particularly important in urban comprehensive schools where socially disadvantaged boys, students with EAL and those with special needs require the oral rehearsal and scaffolding that talk brings to reading and writing. It is the one in five children who fail to reach the national standard in literacy at age 11 who particularly benefit from lessons that value their culture and their oral language. For future generations, and for the most disadvantaged children, the change must not just be eclectic."

There is very little chance, that while reading and writing tests remain 'non-negotiable' that the development of talk will remain other than eclectic, piecemeal, spasmodic, diffident, tacked on afterwards and very rarely promoted by management in schools. Can I persuade you to join the battle for talk? I would like all English departments to buy this book, try out the strategies in the classroom, and then persuade colleagues in other subjects to try them out too. Planning for talk takes time, but can I point you to www.collaborativelearning.org which with NATE support sustains a network for the development and dissemination of effective transferable strategies for talk in all subjects and at every phase. Can I also recommend that all teacher trainers buy this book to help them to revisit all the excellent research on talk that took place between 1965 and the 1990s.

Valerie Coultas: *Constructive Talk in Challenging Classrooms - strategies for behaviour management and talk based tasks*. Routledge 2007 ISBN 978-0-415-40343-6

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