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An Oracy Odyssey - NATE Multicultural Diversity
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I would like to look a little into the past before I make suggestions for the future work of this group. I would first like to thank, as an introduction to my talk, three individuals, centuries apart, who profoundly influenced my rather untypical teaching/learning career. It's fascinating how early twists and turns in your studying can have deep impact. The first individual is Orm, a twelfth century monk, who lived and wrote in the East Midlands. He became more interested in spoken language and its transmission than in the content he was supposed to be writing about. He devised a spelling system that makes it possible for us to make a reasoned guess as to how East Midlands dialect sounded in Orm's time. Like Orm, I became more interested in the medium than the message. I changed from studying literature to learning medieval languages; from reading Keats and Shelley to reading Beowulf and the Song of Roland. This led to studying the new science of Linguistics, pure and applied which took me subsequently to Bucharest and Munich teaching English and creating fruitful environments for English to flourish.

I returned to the UK and my expertise in linguistics landed me a job in Birmingham training teachers. I had

pointed out, when interviewed, my lack of experience in working in schools and was able to organise my timetable so that I could spend a day a week teaching in a challenging school in the Black Country, which at that time was still full of hammering and other metal bashing activities. I even encountered and interviewed the last remaining ornamental chain makers of Cradley Heath! In Birmingham I met the second individual who has influenced my thinking; Andrew Wilkinson.

Andrew considered that the study of spoken language had been neglected in schools and thought that a new word 'oracy' needed to be coined to match literacy and raise its status to make it worthy of study. He felt there was a discrepancy between the unmentioned purpose of the private school system to train leaders and the state system to train silent unquestioning writers. The main issue for him at the time was class. He gave me a copy of his little book "Spoken English". I began with my students to explore how oracy could develop a higher profile in schools but at the same time also explored how my own teaching with colleagues and students could focus more on oracy in the belief that teachers who talked purposefully and professionally with each other would value the process to the extent that they would promote it with their students.

I continued to pursue these ideas around oracy in different contexts. I moved to the US where I worked on

establishing and enabling critical language programmes. Critical languages are languages which students are keen to learn to pursue their careers, but where they are studying there is no subject department to teach the language. Students follow a self-study course, but they also meet, twice a week, a fellow student native speaker to practice pronunciation. These encounters between the students were monitored and I discovered that they frequently led to fascinating and empowering conversations. The student was not allowed to teach the language, but many of these conversations were inspiring. I have recently discovered that critical language programmes have expanded and are now offered in a number of colleges across the US. One language in my college where students excelled was Chinese. The college now has a fully operating department.

I returned to the UK and chose to work in central London. I joined a 'language service' and worked with new arrivals half the week in a language centre and half the week in their challenging schools. I shared the frustrations of the children who were always trying to make sense of two half environments. I also started teaching a language development course for the Open University in my everlasting search for a balance between teaching and reflection on and talking about teaching. One of my students was the third individual who made a difference, Susan Hart. Together we began

to formulate the big question: what styles of learning are truly inclusive. We engaged in teacher action research. She was teaching special needs in a school in south London but arranged to be able to teach an integrated English and humanities year seven class: nearly half their teaching week. We agreed to plan and teach this class together for a year. I took unpaid leave to achieve this, but after a year had persuaded the ILEA multicultural inspectorate to fund this work. I subsequently was able to test out our way of working with different subject teachers in different schools across London. That was the origin of collaborative learning: a style of teaching based on careful joint planning and subsequent reflection and replanning. It valued the work of teachers who were also reflective researchers.

Partnership Teaching was a complementary strategy that boosted opportunities to develop collaborative learning. It raised the profile of teachers of EAL planning and coteaching with subject and class teachers by formalising the process of joint planning and building in a school endorsed dissemination phase. There are still schools where partnerships are supported by the whole school and which benefit all teachers.

For many years Collaborative Learning helped to sustain the development and dissemination of our answers to the big question. It worked closely with the LINC project and the National Oracy Project until each of these

initiatives were stifled, closed down and could only be disseminated by samizdat. I would like to suggest that the NATE MC working group could plan, try out and disseminate inclusive activities. If children new to English had the chance to engage with these approaches for ten minutes in every hour there would be very little need for separating them into other classes. If these strategies could be used in every subject...? I feel that English teachers are not always the only teachers concerned with language across the curriculum. There is a strong interest among science teachers to develop a dialogic approach and it might well be possible for positive cross department support for our big question. What do you think?