

Attractions of the North Pole: learning together in humanities

Susan Hart and Stuart Scott

A common response to the introduction of more diverse teaching-groups has been the production of large quantities of individualized learning materials. The effect has been cynically referred to as 'death by a thousand worksheets'. In the I.L.A (Inner London Education Authority) Collaborative Learning Project, Susan Hart and Stuart Scott looked for an alternative which would make children less dependent on teacher direction, and more dependent on, and able to use, their own ideas and skills. At the same time, they sought an approach that would require collaboration between pupils. Here they offer an example of their work.

Skill development should always be part of an activity that has meaning and purpose for the child. Yet, as recently as 1980, most of the provision made for 'remedial' and bilingual children involved withdrawing them to special classes and units, with the result that learning took place in an artificial context which had little or no link with regular classroom work. This conveyed the wrong messages to learners and teachers alike. It encouraged poor readers to see reading as a ritual which they did to please teachers but which had little to do with the rest of their lives; it gave those learning English as a second language (ESL) the impression that they had to master English before they could benefit from what the classroom had to offer; and it suggested to the subject-teachers that, since these pupils were getting help elsewhere, there was no need to consider ways of making their own teaching more appropriate. Finding that, as teachers of 'remedial' and bilingual pupils, we shared a similar dissatisfaction with these arrangements, we decided to work together to see what alternatives could be found.

We sensed that what our children needed was the sort of language experience fostered by the best primary practice where they could learn through interaction with other children. Reading and ESL support could then be provided within the classroom through the medium of their normal class activities. Yet we knew that the standard pattern of secondary teaching, in which pupils spend most of their time either listening or writing, was unlikely to provide an environment rich in opportunities for reading and

language development. What we set out to do, therefore, was to look at alternative ways of organizing learning in the secondary classroom so that children would be motivated to read, write and talk together, while accepting the limits of the curriculum as defined by the subject areas at that time. We therefore arranged to teach a first-year mixed-ability humanities class the following year, and began to consider a range of different strategies which might encourage collaboration.

We were not happy about many of the approaches traditionally offered as ways of catering for different levels of ability, which tend to differentiate between children and isolate them from one another rather than getting them to work together. Individualized worksheets, workcards and project-based methods, for instance, have no in-built need to collaborate, and rely heavily on the very language skills our pupils lack. We thought, too, that simplifying reading-material often leads to texts which are so banal they are not worth reading. Offering alternative tasks to, say, the bottom third of the class cuts those pupils off from their peers, and can have much same 'labelling'-effect as if the children are withdrawn.

We soon discovered too that sets of information textbooks, no matter how attractively presented, were more likely to deaden than to stimulate discussion. The presence of thirty copies of the same book in the classroom implies a prepackaged view of knowledge which ignores what the children themselves have to offer the learning process. We believed it was important for pupils to express and explore ideas in their own words, using texts as something to be questioned and worked on rather than just assimilated.

We began to try out ways of getting children actively involved in talking and sharing what they knew about a topic before they went to books as sources of information. We looked for ways to help them extract and use ideas from books without slavishly copying everything down. We wanted to bring alive the impersonal information of textbooks through personalized studies of 'real' people that were rich in detail, and to help the children engage with the ideas and respond critically to their reading in ways other than writing.

It seemed that, if we were to achieve a lively involvement in language activities, then we would need to reduce drastically the role of teacher talk and whole-class 'discussion', and set the children working in small self-directed groups as much as possible. If these groups were to be able to work independently of the teacher, however, specially designed materials would be needed to stimulate and focus the discussion activities. We realized that we had to be especially careful, however, that any materials we produced were not too directive. We did not want to restrict the possibilities of collaborative group work. There was also the danger that the activities might become a substitute for books, instead of stimulating children to use and enjoy a wide range of resources, as we intended.

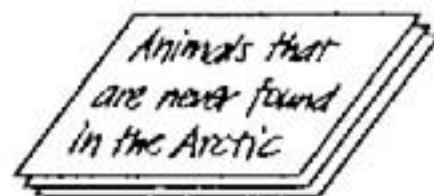
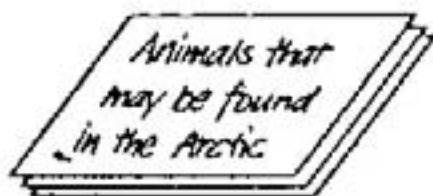
ANIMALS OF THE ARCTIC

An example of the kind of activity which we produced is explained below. This lesson is part of a unit of work on adaptation and survival, and the pupils are exploring what sources of food there might be in harsh conditions such as those of the Arctic.

The instructions for what they have to do are written down (see figure 33.1), and the children have to work this out together. The reading is shared and the activity can begin as soon as they understand the task, without having to wait for other groups to be ready, or for the teacher to explain. Having cards to hold and look at one by one, to read and talk about together, to sort and share, means that right away everyone can become involved. Children who would never speak in front of the whole class have a chance to talk and share what they already know. Starting the lesson in this way confirms to the children that what every child brings to the lesson is valued as a resource for others. Even if the bilingual pupil does not join in the initial interaction,

ANIMALS IN THE ARCTIC

- 1 Work in pairs. Sort your animals into two piles.



- 2 Now check with another pair whether your ideas are the same. Explain your choices.
- 3 Now take the animals that live in the Arctic and use the books to find out how well you guessed. You may find some more animals. Fill in your group checklist as you go along.

Figure 33.1

ANIMALS IN THE ARCTIC CHECKLIST

Name of animal	Found in Arctic	Not found in Arctic	Name of animal	Found in Arctic	Not found in Arctic
arctic foxes			snakes		
arctic hares			swan geese		
arctic terns			stoats		
beavers			toucans		
bats			vultures		
Canada geese			walruses		
caribou			whales		
cod			wolves		
elephants					
frogs					
lemmings					
mice					
moles					
mosquitoes					
musk oxen					
planktonic animals					
polar bears					
ptarmigan					
ravens					
red squirrels					
robins					
seals					
sheep					
shrews					

Figure 33.2

he/she is able to perceive the purpose of the activity and has time to listen and reflect before joining in.

Within the limits defined by the topic, the children can also to some extent develop the activity in their own way. Because there are no tightly specified learning objectives, the children can begin from where they are and pursue their own concerns and interests. Language work is taking place at a variety of different levels. Children are identifying and describing the animals. They are using previous knowledge to explain and justify their decisions. They are speculating on which animals could survive in the Arctic and which could be hunted for food. It is up to them whether they raise issues such as migration, hibernation, warm- and cold-bloodedness or the possibility of animals being sources of dairy products, or to what depth these issues are explored.

When the children come to use the information books in the second part of the lesson to check their predictions, they know exactly what they are looking for. They learn to use books as tools for purposes which they have defined themselves, selecting from a wide range of resource books those titles most likely to meet their needs. They learn to use chapter headings and indexes confidently to locate information. They come to accept that no one book can answer all their questions, and begin to note discrepancies between books in the information presented. Besides using books to confirm and check what they already know, they search out more information and settle disagreements. They can follow up points of interest and questions that have arisen in discussion. They pass their findings on to each other and share interesting pictures, captions and passages together. Whatever their stage of reading development, everybody can use books to find information that will contribute to the work of the group.

Their combined efforts are recorded on a checklist (figure 33.2), which is designed to eliminate unnecessary writing. So often, information-gathering leads to verbatim copying. We wanted to encourage the kind of writing which follows reflection and discussion. Sometimes, writing might also be a group effort.

At the end of the lesson, the class come together as a group to share their findings. These can be presented visually against a backcloth Arctic landscape onto which pictures of the various animals can be placed. Gradually the picture is built up by representatives of each group. Since the result is knowledge produced by the class as a whole, not reproduced from textbook or teacher talk, it should hold personal meaning for everyone in the group.

ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Since we first began working with collaborative groups, we have come to recognize more clearly the significance of the teacher's role. At first, we were so concerned not to inhibit pupils' discussion by our presence that we tended to relegate the teacher to a management role, once the materials had been carefully designed and prepared in advance. Now we see that the teacher has two more essential tasks. First, teachers have to actively foster an atmosphere of co-operation by incorporating activities which build up a sense of trust within the group as a whole. Secondly, they have to learn how best to intervene in a group discussion and, without imposing their own concerns, assist the pupils in extending and developing their own thinking.

ROLE OF THE SUPPORT TEACHER

Classrooms organized on collaborative lines are ideal for effective support work. Both teachers can spend their time constructively working with groups for extended periods. ESL pupils and those with reading difficulties can be

given support in their groups as they carry out the task. Sometimes groups may be withdrawn to work quietly elsewhere, but the same or related work is done and nobody misses anything.

COLLABORATIVE WORK AMONG TEACHERS

The principles behind collaborative work apply just as much to teachers as to pupils. Two teachers can help each other and learn a great deal through joint lesson-planning, talking over what happened and evaluating lessons together. When a reading- or ESL-teacher is involved, however, the partnership can be especially valuable. Our concerns for reading and language development combine with and complement the curricular concerns of the subject-teacher to everyone's advantage. As a model for in-service work, therefore, collaborative teaching between support teachers and subject-teachers has much to offer.

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