

My Oracy Odyssey

I would like to thank SASSEA colleagues for supporting the Collaborative Learning Project for many years now. I would also like to thank, as an introduction to my talk, three individuals, centuries apart, who profoundly influenced my rather unusual 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, and changed from studying literature to learning medieval languages; from reading Keats and Shelley to Beowulf and the Song of Roland. This led to studying the then new science of Linguistics, pure and applied, which took me subsequently to Bucharest and Munich teaching English language and creating fruitful environments for English study 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. I learned to teach children surrounded by smoke, hammering and other metal bashing activities. I even encountered the last remaining ornamental chain makers of Cradley Heath! In Birmingham I met the second individual who has strongly 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'. He wanted to raise status of classroom conversations to make them worthy of study. There was, in his opinion, a discrepancy between the unmentioned purpose of the private system designed to train leaders and the state system designed to train silent unquestioning writers. The 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, a native speaker, to practice pronunciation. These encounters between the students were monitored and I discovered that they frequently led to fascinating conversations. The native speaker 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 across a large number of colleges across the US. One language in my college where students excelled was Chinese. The college now has a fully operating department. Research we carried out at the time confirmed that success in language learning depended much more on motivation than so called language ability.

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 lively challenging schools. I shared the frustrations of these 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 that still demands my attention: what styles of learning are truly inclusive. She was teaching in a school in south London and arranged to be able to teach an integrated English and humanities year seven class. We agreed to plan and teach this class together for a year. Initially 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 this way of working with different subject teachers in different schools across London. That was the origin of the collaborative learning project: a style of teaching for multilingual classes 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 strategies in school. It raised the profile of teachers of EAL planning and coteaching with subject and class teachers by formalising the process of in school joint planning. It added 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 we have enjoyed working with colleagues across the UK and beyond. Since we believe that our strategies benefit all, we have worked in

partnership with subject associations. We also used to work with LINC and the National Oracy Project. Many teachers in other subject areas, particularly maths and science, are keen to develop dialogic approaches which can turn out to be very EAL friendly. Nowadays, we are unfortunately also encountering colleagues with an EAL responsibility in schools that do not allow cross curricular work nor even joint working in classrooms. EAL has retreated to the EAL cupboard. What is the situation in your school?

So currently the Collaborative Learning Project:

Promotes and sustains the value of teachers with different knowledge and expertise reflecting on practice and developing empowering resources for all pupils. The process is as important as the products.

Shares these resources with colleagues worldwide since they inspire further work in different settings.

CL works best when the whole school supports the development of classroom talk.

These resources improve all classroom relationships and provide earlier access and empowerment for pupils new to English.

Ideally all pupils will benefit from opportunities to engage in dialogic encounters, empowering conversations for ten to fifteen minutes in every hour of

the school day. While these take place teachers have ideal opportunities to listen in and assess pupil progress.

<http://www.collaborativelearning.org/conceptoforacy.pdf>

<http://www.collaborativelearning.org/influencesonoracy.pdf>

<http://www.collaborativelearning.org/spokenenglishinschool.pdf>

<http://www.collaborativelearning.org/northpole.pdf>

<https://learningwithoutlimits.educ.cam.ac.uk/>

<http://www.collaborativelearning.org/partnershipteaching.pdf>

