Exploring teaching and learning in real and virtual worlds
Group work: social pedagagy and the SPRinG project

Narration
Professor Maurice Galton is the Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Commonwealth Education at the University of Cambridge. For the past twenty years he's been involved in research into group work in schools, and he's often quoted as saying that pupils sit in groups but they rarely interact and work as groups. We started by asking him why that might that be the case.

Maurice:
The National Curriculum has been a problem in that there's been this emphasis on whole class teaching and the pressures that are on teachers to deliver outcomes, have made it very difficult to develop group work in any significant way, because if you want to do group work there's quite a lot of preparation and all this cuts into the time you need to deliver the Curriculum and particularly in the area where I was concerned, which was Key Stage 3, there was target setting at regular intervals.

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The sort of group work that Maurice would like to see promoted within the curriculum is called social pedagogy.

Maurice:
The central nature of social pedagogy is that it is group work done under the most normal conditions that you can get in classrooms as possible, in other words it's the normal curriculum, it's the normal number of pupils, it's the teacher, it's the materials, it's all the things that are possible. What we try to do is to look at group work in a naturalistic context.

The main underpinnings of the social pedagogical group work really come from a notion of several areas. They first of all come from the idea of social constructivism, namely that we learn through talk and sharing talk. There are also other issues to do with the nature of having a metacognitive awareness, the notion about metacognitive expertise and developing that is that you have to think about the work at a strategic sense and you also have to know which strategies don't work, so you need to develop these skills as well. And the third kind of areas is that of social relational theories which suggest that you cannot work in groups unless you have a – trust is probably too strong a word – but unless you have a kind of acceptance of others, and that you feel confidence that others will accept you.

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So how does Maurice see group work as being different to collaborative learning?

Maurice:
Collaborative learning is a theory about how people do learn through collaboration. Group work, on the other hand, is one of the processes by which you can collaborate, We use, for example, collaborative group work in a particular sense and that is where people are sharing a common task so there is joint responsibility for the outcome, and that distinguishes in our mind from what we call co-operative group work, where people have individual autonomy for certain amounts of the work, that is they may do part of it on their own, and then they collaborate by bringing that part and sharing it in a common final outcome. Then there's what we call seated groups, casual collaboration of the kind where children are seated together doing individual work but, they may share answers, there is an element of collaboration but we reserve the kind of notion in our work for collaborative learning where people are completely dependent and inter-dependent on each other and so are able to work towards a common goal, so they might, for example, be discussing a social issue, they might be writing a play, all these kind of things might be examples of true collaboration.

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Next we asked Maurice to tell us about one of his recent research projects, the Social Pedagogic Research into Group Work or SPRinG project, which was designed to improve the effectiveness of pupil groups in classrooms. The project had three co-directors – Maurice looking at group work in secondary schools and Professors Peter Kutnick and Peter Blatchford looking at group work in primary schools.

Maurice:
There were several main purposes to SPRinG. The first was to compare group work with other forms of instruction in the real live classroom other than in an artificial experimental situation. The second part of it was to explore the need to train pupils to work in groups. And the third part was this metacognitive awareness, that is you have to understand what it is to be a group person because when you understand what it is to be a group person then you're able to cope with other people's behaviours because you understand where they're coming from, and so on. So we needed to develop a training program that would make group work as effective as possible.

The three main characteristics of this social pedagogical framework, the first was that   we used what we call this relational approach, that is you had to develop group work skills in a context where children had confidence in each other to, as it were, accept each other's ideas and so on. Teachers cannot just place pupils into groups and expect them to work well together there was an extended period of preparation, and they had to learn these skills and to develop trust in each other, so that was the first principle, the relational element of it. The second principle is that you must involve teachers in the design of the study, so part of the design comes out of the concerns of the teachers, So teachers might say, for example, that one of the major issues for them was mixed ability or setting, which was the best for group work, so we'd have to build into the design those kinds of issues before we did any kind of comparative study of working in groups versus, say, working in some other way.

We had 14 English, 16 science and another 12 mathematics teachers in the study, and the teachers had a big input in the developments phase. We spent a whole year and more with the science and the mathematics teachers, nearly a year and a half, working through the development of rules and arrangements and practice, whereby we would hold monthly meetings, and teachers would try something out and then came back and give feedback, and discuss it among themselves and then perhaps modify what they wanted to do, and so on.

We chose areas which we thought were key; that was the development of rules of group work and the ownership of those rules by the pupils; the development of what we call maintenance strategies, that is being able to keep the group work moving so that, for example, you didn't lose track of time, and ended up not finishing because you'd spent too much time discussing and not a time kind of summarising the results; the third one was creating a way of getting decisions without having to vote, in other words, developing through a consensual rather than through a kind of arguing who the majority rule type of approach. So those were the three key kind of elements but out of our discussions of pupils saying that they didn't like the teachers coming into the groups until they felt strong enough to resist the teachers' ideas we developed then a fourth kind of rule and this was a kind of neutral space rule, that is that there were parts of the classroom that belonged to the teacher, like near the blackboard and in front of the desk, where children expected the teacher to deliver. There were parts of the room that belonged to the child, that is round the desk or the tables where they working together, but there were some spaces that belonged to neither, and we discovered out of that, as a kind of fourth dimension, whereby if the teacher wanted to say something they tended to say it from near the door or at the back of the room

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One of the aspirations of the SPRinG project was to get teachers to talk less and pupils to talk more. Maurice thinks teachers should be a 'guide on the side' rather than a 'sage on the stage'.

Maurice:

Well we use the term 'guide on the side and not a sage on the stage' to mean obviously that we wanted them to abandon the Flanders two-thirds rule which is that two-thirds of the classroom consists of talk and two-thirds of that talk is the teacher. we need to think more in education about different models that we have about how people learn. Being a sage on the stage, as it were, stems very much from a notion of the mind as a computer, you know an information processing model, where the main input is the programming of the children, and there's quite abundant evidence that that works well when you're dealing with procedural knowledge and so on, but it doesn't work well when you're dealing with conceptual knowledge or trying to teach people deeper understanding, there the evidence is quite strong that you need to engage in thoughtful discourse, so the importance of that therefore is that there should be adequate thinking time for children. There should be, as it were, a predominance of pupil talk and so it's the reverse of the Flanders position and as far as possible the ideas should generate from the child rather from the teacher. If the teacher comes into the group and kind of simplifies the problem or whatever it is, then you're creating a dependency all the time, they expect the teacher to come and do it for them, become the sage, they do so much guiding that they eventually just do the whole thing so that's why using the kind of cognitive scaffolds that have often been used, building it into the task itself, using debriefing exercises to bring out what the points are, and briefing exercises to frame the activity before people started. A lot of teachers developed very useful ways of scaffolding work by first of all going round and sitting next to the table, but not in the table group. Some teachers used to put their hands over their mouths to indicate that they were listening, and not watching, and not talking, and then they would go to somewhere which was neutral in the room, and they would say things like now, I've been going around and there are lots of useful ideas and I've also got some of my own, and I'll tell you about some of the things I've heard, and so on, and you may find these of use, there was no ownership there at all, it wasn't seen as takeover, it was just seen as an input, and that seemed to work very well as a way of scaffolding, particularly for group work.

Narration
Another aspiration was to promote higher order dialogue.

Maurice:
The work in the United States, particularly of Noreen Webb, shows that the ability to be able to reason and to explain is a key factor in developing the academic outcomes of group work. And it follows from both Piagetian and Vygotskian theories as to why that might be so. In order to reconstruct one's understanding and one's schema, you need to have cognitive dissonance so people have to challenge your existing ideas so that creates a kind of a dynamic which informs the dialogue and it helps through what is called 'thoughtful discourse' to promote learning and understanding, and the key features are mostly explanations, asking questions, in most classrooms, children don't ask questions, they answer them, and so the emphasis on raising questions, is the second important kind of feature. And the third one of the dialogue is extended dialogue because if it's very short lived, it's unlikely to, as it were, clarify, develop all these kind of understandings that are so important, so all these things are aids to developing and reconstructing knowledge to developing strategies, which things helped me learn and which things didn't help me learn, and that leads to metacognitive wisdom which is the kind of ultimate in the goal.

Narration
Maurice has some more very practical ideas for improving the effectiveness of pupil groups in classrooms.

Maurice:
To make group work effective there are a number of things that are important. I think the first is to judge the nature of the task that you're going to set. You see quite a lot of literature on research, in co-operative learning as well, stresses the social aspects of grouping, the relational aspects of grouping, and while they're important, the main outcome of teaching is to produce an academic result, and too many group tasks which are used are often only about children learning to co-operate, they have a very trivial academic outcome, and so for us the group task has to have a significant academic output, it has to be worth doing, it just mustn't be about getting children to like one another. What kind of task you choose, depends on the

level of co-operation and willingness to co-operate amongst the class itself, that's the second point of the task. The third point of the task is, where, if you like, the scaffolding is built into the task itself, because too much of what is done by way of scaffolding in classrooms is done through guided discovery, namely the teacher gives hints in order to simplify the task so it's not too demanding for the child. what that does is lower the risk of the task by lowering its ambiguity, that is its complexity. Now what you really want to do is to lower the risk but maintain the complexity. if I give you an example of a science task which is related to sound where they had to decide why you could hear sound from a distance, this teacher's scaffolding it by directing them first of all to brainstorm ideas as to why, then to put into a pile those ideas which could be tested scientifically, you know, could do an experiment, and then from that pile take only those ideas that could be done with the apparatus that was provided. That therefore limited and narrowed it but it didn't stop them thinking about the idea. The next important thing is the briefing and the de-briefing activities; I think that's very, very important, because it is about getting a metacognitive understanding of what it is to be a group person, so teachers have to continually remind pupils as to why they're doing this task, that sometimes it's about sharing ideas and so what's the main purpose of it at the beginning, and how you work together, are expected to work together, then at the end of it kind of developing these strategies by saying how well did you work together and, more important, what do you need to do next time to make this a better kind of way of working and solving the problems that I've set you. So those are two very important things that are part of that. The third I think is of the maintenance, building into the tasks and the briefings like being able to at certain times summarise where you've got to, decide what else you've got to do, and so on, and allocate tasks. We found it very difficult to get teachers to do that, particularly the debriefings, particularly if they felt under pressure, I think we probably didn't do enough to underpin the theory of why it was necessary to debrief.

There's a whole issue of transfer –how you do group work in science isn't the same as how you do it in English, one of the things was that in some cases the training hadn't been adapted to fit the kind of science where you do group work anyway because you've got limited equipment but it doesn't often involve you in sharing, it involves you in partitioning out work, you know you do this, you do that, you do the observations, and so on, so you need to change the nature of how the group works in science. English teachers are generally more successful as they were already operating much of the model because they needed to in some of the topics they discussed, for example, you're in an English lesson and you're reading a novel which deals with relationships between boys and girls you've got to be pretty confident if you want to kind of expand that into discussion, that you're not going to get boys jeering at girls, and so on, that they're going to be much more sensible.

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Finally, we asked Maurice about what the SPRinG research found out about pupils attitudes to group work, and how training to work in groups can benefit everyone in the classroom.

Maurice:
We found quite interestingly that generally most children were in favour of working in groups, they preferred it to working as a whole class situation, there were very academic pupils who didn't want to participate and there were also what the late Jean Rudduck called dossers. strong anti-learning, anti-school cultures, who also wanted to opt out, partly for a different reason, they felt threatened by the groups, whereas the more academic pupils in that situation felt that they didn't want to do the work for others, they didn't want to give away all their good ideas, and so on. So you had kind of two extremes, in other words if the things that were happening in the groups that children rated and said everybody got a turn, everybody was listened to and respected, we shared ideas and so, if that was operating then even the groups that were slightly anti group work became more positive, and they began to kind of feel yes, it was a good kind of way, so that was the importance of the training, you see, that you needed to train people to work in groups. If you could train them to work in groups and the groups were effective, then you could improve the attitudes; if you didn't train them then you didn't improve the attitudes and so it didn't work as well.

Yes, we developed a way of analysing certain groups of pupils who kind of had similar attitudes and also behaviours as well in the observations, we had a group we called 'group shirkers', they didn't want to take part at all. They tended to come from the 'anti' school, and anti-learning group, Then we had a group that were just reluctant collaborators, they didn't disrupt, they more or less just avoided taking part, they let other people do the things for them, and so on. Then we had a kind of willing collaborator group, they were very encouraged, they liked doing it, they were very strong on it, and then the fourth group that we identified, they kind of worked alone and they were tolerating and so on as part of the process, so they did their own thing and they were contributive, but they weren't kind of willing and active as part of that, so we had the kind of the four groups that we saw.
It raised questions for us as to what should a teacher do if they identified such pupils.

Those who went through the training were unanimous in telling us that it changed the environment of the classroom, it changed the kind of relationships between them and their pupils, and between the pupils, but they needed to persevere with it. One teacher said to us at the end, I used to think that group work was the problem, now I know it's the solution to many of my other problems.

We had schools that had challenging circumstances and although they found it more difficult, particularly if it was a setted school so they would have children in the lower set, there weren't the children who could give, as it were, the academic discourse part, the leadership in terms of explanations, and so on. So what they tended to do was use group work for a relational rather than academic purpose, you know, they would develop tasks which encouraged people to share and they found again that it worked but they couldn't, as it were, fulfil the whole program, what it did was improve behaviour if they lowered the natures of the tasks so that they weren't too academically challenging in those cases, but I see no reason from the research evidence why what applies in one school doesn't apply in the other, it's a question of fitting it to the circumstances.