



## Exploring teaching and learning in real and virtual worlds

*A dialogic teacher's perspective*

### **Narration**

Diane Rawlins is Deputy Head Teacher at a Primary School in the east of England. She and her pupils were participants in Professor Neil Mercer's dialogic teaching research project. How did her involvement influence the way she uses talk in the classroom?

### **Diane:**

I think some of the key issues for me were to plan for talk. I've always had what I would describe as a conversational style of teaching which is based on a lot of interactions with the children. What I wanted to do was to make the interactions more effective in terms of increasing the children's learning, and so it was important to plan much more for talk-based learning to take place rather than it just happening, and also to look at what I actually said. One of the things we did was to film lessons and to look at them to scrutinise them, and I looked particularly at what I said to the children, and I find that I did a lot of reformulating what they said and really just presenting it back to them, but in a way that was more acceptable to me.

What was important was to use that interaction instead in a different way, perhaps to challenge, to try and extend, to ask for more information through an explanation from the child, and I felt that I developed much more of a range of skills in doing that through being very conscious about what I was saying. Small things become obvious like words that you overuse, and saying 'okay' a lot, and all that sort of thing, once I'd got over that, I was much more able to almost classify the things that I was saying. And also to feel okay about the times when you just have to reformulate. I learnt quite a lot and changed quite a lot in the actual way that I use what I say to the children, but also in the planning for talk to happen in the classroom. I then had to look at how I would enable that to happen with the children and how I would support that, bearing in mind all the needs that they bring to the classroom as well.

### **Diane:**

Dialogic teaching to me was going to become part of the way that I taught, but what I found with the class this year is that, you know, children being children bring such a range of needs with them that I've had to again look carefully at how I support them, how I introduce it so that we gradually move to a classroom where the conventions are that we talk when we learn, but we talk with purpose and we talk in a way that helps us to question each other and to hypothesise and that it's okay to do that and it's okay to get it entirely wrong because that's all part of the learning. That's very important.

### **Narration:**

Are there times when talk is not a good thing?

### **Diane:**

I guess when they're doing their SATS test they should be quiet. Apart from that there are few times that I would discourage talk. With the children you might assume they would understand perfectly, day-to-day experiences, but actually they don't and through talking that's one of the ways we can begin to identify where the gaps are and to support them, otherwise their learning is just going to be patchy because it won't be really hooked into a good network of knowledge. So, not just any old talk, but good quality talk all the time.

One of the things we talked a lot about when I was involved in the research was whether children need to be actively participating in the dialogue to benefit from dialogic teaching I think you could design a situation where every child had to say something but actually in the end nobody really learnt anything. I think it's important to look at children's roles within

groups and how they can perhaps have the time to develop to a position where they feel comfortable to talk in front of a group. Sometimes that means working in very small groups; sometimes it means the children choosing their groups one of the things I tried in the research project was for the last lesson in the series to let them choose their groups 'cos they had said to me they wanted to, and they weren't sure why I wasn't letting them. Those groups worked extremely well in that situation; I think it's about putting together everything we know about the child. We have a lot of bi-lingual children at our school and we want to encourage them to take part so one of the things we would hopefully have done was to make sure that, if it was a talk-based task that there had been pre-teaching of vocabulary, that children were supported in being able to access what we were doing, and so children that perhaps would have difficulty expressing themselves in English we hope would be supported to participate. Obviously we can bring in lots of other ways of taking part as well – perhaps more practical ways of drawing, or I've had children taking photographs to illustrate things, making freeze-frame pictures to illustrate a point of view, also using the whiteboard – I've had children recording their opinions directly onto it, so a child that doesn't want to speak in front of a group is sometimes happy to go and sit in the corner of the room with the microphone and record their view, and it goes directly onto the flipchart page which we can then refer to in the lesson. There are lots of ways of enabling children to access dialogue at different levels. It's not as simple as 'let's have groups and make everybody talk' I think that's been a really huge thing to learn on the way.

**Narration:**

What sorts of benefits does dialogic teaching bring?

**Diane:**

I think it's important to have dialogic teaching in subjects such as science because we don't necessarily know how much children know about it, where are they coming from, It's not unusual to find children that have quite a persistent misunderstanding about something and you only discover that when you talk to them. You could mark written work and think why are they getting this wrong all the time, but it's only when you talk to them that you understand, and so really in something like science it's perfect to have as many opportunities to talk, as long as you listen to what the children are saying.

**Narration:**

What other benefits were there from participating in the dialogic teaching project?

**Diane:**

I think it's really valuable for teachers to work alongside researchers or people working in universities in all sorts of capacities in that it helps us to I think bring together the practical day-to-day issues, but also to benefit from being challenged by people who weren't doing it day-to-day but were knowing about the issues and looking at them from that kind of different perspective that made me question what I was saying, why did I believe in them, why were they important?

**Diane:**

In terms of evaluating the project we looked at some clips which we chose from the lessons that were filmed – critical episodes – critical in that there was evidence at that point that some learning was happening – either it was new learning and there was a kind of almost signs of a eureka thing happening – or a changing of opinion, so modifying of something. Sometimes it was based on a collaboration between two children, and if you see them kind of deconstructing the ideas that they both had, and then hopefully moving on, and there were lots of good examples of children almost agreeing to disagree, realising there was a difference, they were not going to solve it, but I also came across some marvellous examples of children saying I used to think such and such, but now I believe that this is right instead, and having children actually there saying I thought this was true, but I've learnt something different, was tremendously powerful. And so it was by looking at those critical episodes and looking at what was key in helping the children to learn I began to draw the most important things for me to be using in school.