Developing the Talking School: action research at Oxford Spires and St Mark's Church of England Academies

Research report

Alan Howe

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Report compiled and written by Alan Howe

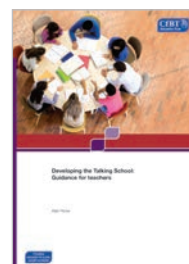**Thanks are due to the following for their contributions:**
St Mark's Academy: Lisa Peterkin (Deputy Principal); Debbie Purdon (English); Hannah Fahey (Humanities), Lucy Brown (Drama)

Oxford Spires Academy: Sue Croft (Principal); Helen Woolley (English); Muna Ahmed (English); Sam Brown (Humanities); Emily Liddle (Tutor); Abdulla Mansour (Science); Debbie Clark (Literacy Coordinator)

The Talking School research project

As part of the Talking School research project, led by Alan Howe for CfBT Education Trust, a Guidance document has been created for teachers and schools which outlines the characteristics of a Talking School and details practical methods that can be used in the classroom for teachers interested in adopting the approach.

Copies of this document can be downloaded from www.cfbt.com

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1 Executive summary

This report outlines approaches taken by two secondary schools to accelerate progress in literacy at Key Stage 3, by focusing specifically on key aspects of oral language development. Students were taught how to develop their skills in discussion and debate in a range of subjects, to deepen their subject understanding and sharpen their critical thinking skills, and to support their progress in writing.

Recent research confirms that introducing debating activities in schools contributes significantly to educational attainment. The participating schools decided to focus on Key Stage 3 in order to investigate the potential impact in the lower secondary years, rather than at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form where debating is more often located.

The focus on discussion and debate was part of a wider whole-school approach designed to enhance students' oral competence and confidence. In each school, a group of subject specialists worked together to plan lessons jointly and use a common set of teaching strategies and classroom activities.

Each school tracked the progress of individual students and evaluated impact through a combination of quantitative measures and qualitative action research methods.

In both schools students made better than expected progress in the subjects that were involved in the initiative. Progress was especially good in English and humanities. There is evidence from a range of sources to indicate that students' competence and confidence in key aspects of speaking and listening (for example presentation and debate) were significantly enhanced.

There is also evidence of positive impact on the quality and depth of student writing, although the transfer from talk into writing of an increased ability to explore, consider and present ideas and arguments does not happen automatically, and depends on additional explicit teaching of discursive writing.

Three aspects of provision contributed to these outcomes:

a. Consistent approaches taken by teachers to the use of discussion and debate in teaching and learning, so that students became accustomed to a common set of high expectations, and had plenty of opportunity to practise and develop skills, often as a result of explicit teaching.

b. The cumulative impact over time (in this case, two terms) of regular opportunities for students to discuss ideas, acknowledge and consider alternative points of view and aspects of evidence, and to sharpen their ability to marshal, present and counter arguments.

c. Collaboration between a core group of teachers who jointly planned lessons, observed one another's teaching, and reviewed progress together. The focus of their collaboration was always firmly on a key question: 'What is working well for the selected group of students?'

Participating teachers valued the opportunity to collaborate on an initiative with a common focus on a key aspect of overall literacy development that also enhanced subject learning. Their repertoire of teaching strategies was expanded through effective professional learning, applying a range of well-

researched strategies to their own subject areas, allied to collaborative support – so that approaches could be tried out and refined after joint reflection and review. The investment made in providing additional time for teachers to plan and review together was good value for money, and is a model of professional development that could be applied to other whole-school initiatives.

Recommendations for other schools interested in trying out a similar approach are proposed, including the importance of starting in a small way with a group of willing teachers from at least three subjects, including English, then planning to scale up at a later time, once approaches have been trialled and evaluated.

2 Introduction

2.1 Methodology

CfBT Education Trust promotes the concept of developing 'research-engaged' schools, with a specific focus on language and languages development. This small-scale project was established in discussion with two academies sponsored by CfBT, as a result of their interest in developing students' skills in spoken English, part of a wider drive to improve literacy and enhance overall attainment.

The project ran from December 2011 to July 2012 in two state comprehensive schools sponsored by CfBT: Oxford Spires Academy and St Mark's Church of England Academy in Mitcham, Surrey.

In each school, a small group of teachers worked together, supported by an external consultant, to strengthen and extend the range of teaching approaches experienced by students, by providing a much greater emphasis on speaking and listening. The choice of participating teachers was made in discussion with senior leaders, based on identifying either a whole class (for example a mixed-ability Year 7 group at Oxford Spires Academy) or a group of students taught in common across subjects (as at St Mark's Academy). The choice of subjects was deliberately restricted so that the project could retain coherence and enable good communication within the group of participating teachers. In addition, both English and humanities teachers were included in both schools: English because of the importance of explicit language and literacy skills teaching; humanities because of the many valid opportunities already present in the curriculum for discussion and debate of issues and evidence.

2.2 Literacy, learning and talk

The project was designed to improve standards of literacy in Key Stage 3 (age 11–14), to support students' ability to access and achieve success in the secondary curriculum. It focused on developing pedagogic approaches to support students' skills in discussion and debate, critical thinking, and writing.

'Literacy' is a product of subsets of applied knowledge and skills in four interdependent components of language – listening, speaking, reading and writing. An effective whole-school approach will vigorously promote each of them, and seek to strengthen the connections between each.

There is a wealth of evidence for the importance of talk as a means of thinking and learning, for developing collaborative and cooperative skills, and to extend the understandings and ideas that students bring to the classroom. Collaborative talk in small groups can develop higher-order skills. The key elements are the talking and associated thinking that take place between group members. The main benefits of small-group work lie in the cooperative aspects it can help foster. One advantage is in the contribution this approach can make to the development of learners' social skills. Working with other students can help them to develop their empathetic abilities, allowing them to see others' viewpoints. Trying to find a solution to a problem in a group also develops skills such as the need to accommodate others' views. Learners can also support each other, in the same way that the teacher can, during questioning. Through productive discussion and collaboration, students can explore and express their growing understanding of the curriculum.[1]

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[1] For example: Dawes, Mercer and Wegerif (2000); Johnson and Johnson (1994); Johnson and Johnson (1999).

The 'Talking School' approach combined collaborative talk with planned opportunities within the curriculum for more formal aspects of speaking and listening, where students discussed, debated and argued about ideas and issues in a structured way. Research emphasises the importance of using open, higher-level questions to develop pupils' higher-order thinking skills. Higher-level questions require more sophisticated thinking from pupils: they are more complex and more difficult to answer. Higher-level questions are central to pupils' cognitive development; research evidence suggests that pupils' levels of achievement can be increased by regular access to higher-order thinking.[2] Recent research with the English-Speaking Union (ESU) found that debating activities in schools can contribute not only to educational achievement, but also to a range of wider outcomes, assisting in the development of more confident and well-rounded individuals. The co-published CfBT/ESU report, *Debating the evidence*,[3] explains that school-age debaters are more likely to plan to go on to higher education than their peers, even accounting for their academic achievement. The report also highlights that broadening horizons, improving cultural awareness and the empowerment of young people are important elements of the value of debate activities in school. Skills such as these are vital to support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to progress on to higher education. The schools involved in this study made use of a specific debating approach, called 'constructive controversy'[4] which provides a structure for setting up a debate on a controversial issue, but also requires students to argue for both sides in order to develop a fuller understanding of the issue or topic.

2.3 What characterises a Talking School?

From a 'talking to learn' perspective, a Talking School is characterised by, for example:

• Collaborative talk as part of teaching and learning (whole class, small group, 1–1)

• Carefully designed programmes of teacher-led, group-based activities

• Classrooms that encourage 'exploratory' talk, enabling students to grapple with new ideas and to think through an issue or a problem

• Effective questioning strategies that promote thinking and offer cognitive challenge, where there is a consistent expectation that students will expand on, elaborate and explain their ideas

• Focused, productive talk before, during and after writing

• Students engaging in research and enquiry

• Debating as a part of different subject teaching

• Teaching that provides good models of talking and listening

• Students learning to use appropriate academic discourse (for example 'talking like a scientist') and the correct vocabulary of the subject

• Students who value what they and others say, and who know that teachers are interested in what they say because it provides a window onto their learning

[2] For example: Muijs and Reynolds (2005).
[3] Akerman and Neale (2011).
[4] For an account of the approach, see: **http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_71.htm** or **http://ctl.utexas.edu/teaching-resources/teach-your-course/facilitate-with-intention/constructive-controversy/**

From a 'learning to use talk' perspective, a Talking School is characterised by, for example:

- A range of visitors who talk interestingly and encourage students to converse, to discuss, and to debate

- Student participation in the life of the school, which encourages discussion, debate, negotiation and persuasion about authentic matters – so that talk is seen as 'action on the world'

- Planned opportunities for students to use the spoken word in artistic and creative ways – for example oral storytelling, in improvised and scripted drama, or as part of festivals and celebrations

- Formal debating activities – for example coaching and tuition in debating strategy, including competitive debating – allied to the effective use of debate and formal discussion to deepen learning and build oral skills and confidence.

2.4 Aims and outcomes

The project aimed to:

- develop young people's proficiency in spoken English ('developing a voice')

- use debate and 'organised' or 'disciplined' discussion, to deepen learning and develop critical thinking skills, through using and adapting a teaching strategy – 'constructive controversy' – in lessons

- support pedagogic change and development in the curriculum by using discussion and debate as an active teaching tool

- evaluate impact: progress in learning, in spoken language proficiency, and in wider aspects of literacy

- support teachers in extending their repertoire of teaching strategies, through CPD and action research, promoting leading-edge practice.

Anticipated outcomes from the project for the targeted group of students included:

- increased progress and proficiency in spoken English

- accelerated progress in writing, in particular sentence variety and structure (for example increased proficiency in using complex sentences to reflect increased understanding, and in organising and linking ideas in paragraphs)

- increased subject knowledge, understanding of key concepts, and use of subject-specific language ('academic language') in humanities and in science.

2.5 Project outline

The project was designed to address three key questions:

• How does participation in disciplined discussion and debate impact on overall attainment?

• How does participation in disciplined discussion and debate impact on proficiency in spoken English?

• How does increased proficiency in discussion and debate of ideas impact on progress in writing?

There were four interlocking strands to the approach:

• Building organised or disciplined discussion and debate into the curriculum by using a 'constructive controversy' approach

• Joint planning and observation of lessons followed by discussion among participating teachers of what worked well and why

• Quantitative evaluation of base-line student data and achievement at the end of the academic year compared with expected trajectories. Baseline data for the target group included:

– progress and attainment data in English, drama, humanities and science for the period October 2011 – July 2012

– analysis of current progress in writing. Students produced a piece of non-fiction writing (explanation and/or argument) at the start of the project (January). They carried out a similar task at the end of the project (June) and the development of their writing (at word, sentence and text level, and in terms of expression of ideas) was analysed and compared.

• Qualitative action research, including detailed lesson observations; focused teacher and student interviews; individual teachers' reflective commentaries; observations and reflections.

In each school a small team of teachers worked together to co-plan and review lessons, evaluate progress with students, reflect on and review changes to their own practice, and share approaches and outcomes more widely across the teaching staff.

3 Participating schools

3.1 Oxford Spires Academy

3.1.1 School background
This academy serves a diverse community in East Oxford. There are 799 students on roll, 209 of whom attend the sixth form. An above-average proportion of students come from minority ethnic backgrounds. About half the students speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students who have special educational needs is approximately one quarter of those on roll. The proportion of students who are known to be eligible for free school meals is more than twice the national average.

3.1.2 Outline of the project
A Year 7 class of 25 students was selected to be the focus for the project. The class was a mixed-ability group with a significant ethnic mix, and a number of students who were learning English as an additional language. The five participating teachers all taught the focus class.

3.1.3 Talking School approach: English
The English scheme of work included explicit opportunities to engage in debate, using approaches linked to the constructive controversy approach. Teaching activities and approaches included:

- focused table group discussion and whole-class debates linked to issues and themes in class novels – for example bullying in *Fat boy swim*

- starting lessons with students placing themselves on an 'agree–disagree' continuum – standing at a point in the room to indicate their position on a controversial topic, for example 'Parents are to blame for their obese children'

- quick-fire oral exercises such as 'Just a minute'

- teaching students to prepare and deliver a presentation – for instance on a chosen book or author

- regular opportunities for peer and self-assessment of spoken language against agreed criteria

- a small group visiting a local primary school to co-run debating masterclasses with Year 6 pupils.

3.1.4 Talking School approach: humanities
The main focus was on the use of debate as an explicit teaching tool. Topics included:

- Is nuclear energy safe?

- Is renewable energy the answer to the energy crisis?

- Is it wrong to harm human life?

- Why was William the king of England?

These were properly staged, formal debates, with a mix of student roles: main speaker, questioner, judge, chairperson and reporters. Some of the above issues were selected because of linked content with science and English.

Constructive controversy as an approach was also used as preparation to enable students to consider all sides of an issue.

Specific activities included:

• use of the 'agree–disagree' continuum as a starter: students readily responded to an issue, taking their place in a line (from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree') and being ready to explain where they stood

• placing responsibility on students to be independent researchers, once an issue had engaged their attention: 'What do you need to know to be able to use as evidence?'

3.1.5 Talking School approach: science
Science and humanities lessons were co-planned to ensure that there was appropriate common ground on similar topics – in particular, topics on energy and reproduction.

Constructive controversy and debating were included as part of the following topics:

• Energy changes: including a discussion and a debate on energy sources, culminating in a homework preparation for a debate: 'Should the UK donate to Burkino Faso to build solar panels?'

• Reproduction: including a class discussion on the issue of age and pregnancy, culminating in a debate based on a key question: 'How old is too old to have a child?'

As well as incorporating debating, in other lessons the emphasis was on encouraging student-student and teacher-student dialogue in lessons at key points of learning. In addition, some plenaries included 30-second 'defend the indefensible' quick-fire debates.

3.1.6 Talking School approach: tutor time
The work in tutor time involved students in planning, researching and then delivering individual presentations, applying the skills that they were being explicitly taught in English.

Students chose a focus based on a person or event that had changed the world. They were supported in an initial research phase, and given some parameters for what should be included: some history, geography, science, and a 'for and against' argument, followed up by their own view.

Presentations, supported by a poster or PowerPoint slides, lasted no more than 10 minutes, including questions and follow-up discussion.

3.2 St Mark's Church of England Academy, Mitcham

3.2.1 School background

St Mark's Church of England Academy has around 820 students on roll. One in three students (a proportion that is three times the national average) has English as an additional language. The largest group of students are of White British heritage, although over three quarters are from a range of minority ethnic and cultural backgrounds, mostly from Black African or Caribbean backgrounds. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is almost twice the national average.

3.2.2 Outline of the Talking School approach

Three teachers (of English, religious education and drama) were involved in the study, each teaching a class containing the focus group of six Year 9 students. The participating teachers carried out joint planning and lesson observations, and engaged in a detailed study of the impact of the approaches on student attainment and wider aspects of their learning. These students were also interviewed and wrote their own blog of selected lessons.

3.2.3 Talking School approach: English

Speaking and listening were already features of many English lessons. This project focused on explicit teaching of debating skills, then applying these to key areas of the English scheme of work.

Specific teaching strategies:

- Short starter activities, designed to promote quick thinking and collaborative talk, and to enable students to articulate their initial ideas, based on suggestions from the English-Speaking Union's publication *Discover your voice: debating resources for secondary schools*[5]

- '90-second arguments' – students prepare, then have just 90 seconds to argue for a particular point of view, for example whether a film should be awarded an Oscar or not

- Building debating and disciplined discussion into key areas of learning, for instance a class debate on whether Lady Macbeth is an inherently evil character

- Working in pairs, students select a poem to study and then 'teach' in a series of 10-minute lessons.

3.2.4 Talking School approach: religious education (RE)

Topics taught were all connected to issues about marriage, family life and relationships, and all involved some form of moral dilemma and decision-making, which were suited to using the constructive controversy approach. These included:

- Evaluating how and why married life has changed over the past 50 years (such as increased rates of divorce and co-habitation, the decrease in nuclear families, the availability and use of contraception)

- Debating activities to support students' understanding of different attitudes to these issues from Christian, Muslim and secular perspectives

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[5] The English-Speaking Union (2008).

- 90-second debates – students prepared and delivered a short, cogent speech having been given a statement, a position to adopt, and a planning frame. A variant on this approach, once students were familiar with it, was to ask them to speak for the first 30 seconds, then take a question from the floor and respond to it, then have a final 30 seconds to sum up.

3.2.5 Talking School approach: drama

Drama lessons for the Year 9 group featured a number of approaches based on constructive controversy:

- As part of a major topic based on the case of Stephen Lawrence (a racially motivated murder inquiry), students took on various roles (for example family, friends, accused etc). As a way of supporting and deepening the roles, students were asked to respond to a series of controversial statements, explored the scene of the crime in role as police officers, and 'hot-seated' friends and family. Controversial statements included:

  – 'The death penalty should be reintroduced in the UK.'

  – 'The police in this case were obviously racist.'

The addition of elements of constructive controversy added to the range of drama techniques which would usually have featured in the sequence of the lesson, such as 'still image' or 'thought tracking'.

4 Evidence of impact

4.1 How does participation in disciplined discussion and debate impact on subject-specific attainment?

Given the short timescale of the project, one would not expect national curriculum levels to give much indication of the impact of the Talking School work. However, the progress data collected by both schools does indicate that most students made better than expected progress in subject attainment and progress during the time when teachers were specifically trialling and developing learning through discussion and debate.

4.1.1 Student attainment and progress in English, science and humanities at Oxford Spires Academy from September 2011 to July 2012

The sample group represents the spread of ability in the whole class, as well as a good mix of students by gender, and by English as an additional language. The group was identified in order to enable the teachers to gather additional evidence, including student interviews, and to track their progress in greater detail than usual. Progress made by the students in the Year 7 class at Oxford Spires who were given enhanced opportunities to learn through discussion and debate can be compared with the rest of the year group. This gives an indication of the potential effect of the additional intervention. Data based on teacher assessment of student progress was collected at half-termly intervals. In the focus class the average increase of sub-levels of progress in English was 2.8, compared with 1.2 for the rest of Year 7. In science, the average was 1.5 compared with 1.1 for the rest of the year, and in humanities, the average was 3.8 compared with 2.6.

The table below shows the progress made by the target group. If 'good' progress equates to two sub-levels per year, it can be seen that the majority of the students have exceeded this. In humanities, progress is particularly good. Most made good progress in English, less in science.

Table 1: Progress in English, science and humanities at Oxford Spires Academy

	Gender	EAL	EN KS2: English result	Sub-levels of progress: English	Sub-levels of progress: Science	Sub-levels of progress: Humanities
Student A	F	Y	4	4	1	4
Student B	F	Y	4	2	0	5
Student C	M		4	1	-1	3
Student D	F		5	3	2	5
Student E	M	Y	4	4	1	4
Student F	M	Y	4	4	0	5
Student G	F	Y	4	6	6	6

The very good progress recorded in humanities – based on assessment of student understanding and ability to provide reasons and explanations based on evidence – is likely to be a direct reflection

of the emphasis on structured discussion. An analysis of students' writing[6] in humanities provides additional evidence of the close relationship between their learning – to explore and express ideas, use evidence, and offer reasons and justification in talk – and their growing ability to construct and convey ideas effectively in writing.

4.1.2 Student attainment in English at St Mark's Academy from September 2011 to July 2012
The table below shows the progress of the selected sub-group of Year 9 students in English.

Table 2: Progress in English at St Mark's Academy

Name	Gender	EAL	KS3 English level: Autumn	KS3 English level: Summer	Number of sub-levels of improvement
Student A	M	Y	6b	7b	3
Student B	M		6a	7a	3
Student C	F	Y	6a	7b	2
Student D	M		6b	6a	1
Student E	M		7c	7c	0
Student F	M	Y	5a	6a	3

All students except one made progress in English overall. Half made better than expected progress – one full level of progress between October 2011 and July 2012.

The main evidence for impact with students comes from lesson observations, from an analysis of qualities in their writing, and in detailed feedback from the participating teachers who were able to observe each of the six individual students at work in lessons on six occasions over the course of the study.

4.1.3 Impact on learning and progress
The good (and often accelerated) progress made by these students in both schools is a consequence of the more effective learning, increased levels of participation, and enhanced motivation that occurred as a result of the 'Talking School' approach. The following aspects of learning were common to the work with the target teaching groups in both schools. Participating teachers commented that students were:

- developing a wider vocabulary and ability to comprehend big questions and draw on key subject knowledge

- able to grasp ideas more quickly. This meant that content could be covered in greater depth. *'Students know how to get to an answer… there are signs that many have become more logical in the way that they process information and explain ideas'*

- starting to use more formal or technical language in their answers and comments: *'They are learning key vocabulary because they can see the need to use it in debate'*

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[6] See page 19 for an account of the impact on students' writing.

- more likely to process a question, to wait and think something through before responding; they also understood that they could work out an answer which was not immediately available to them, rather than looking to an authoritative source

- better able to work out how to approach a task, and how to structure their work; for example making appropriate use of connectives in their writing to link ideas, drawing on evidence and giving reasons

- more independent: *'They are willing to discuss and debate without being asked – at times it is hard to stop them'*

- used to being challenged – they accepted that some of the work would be hard, and that they needed to work together to understand it and to make sense of some of the concepts and ideas.

> *'Students are more able to tackle a big question. They enjoy getting to grips with something like "Can a king do what he wants?" because they are better equipped to make links between lessons – they recognise the importance of what they are doing on one day because it has a bearing on what they will need to do independently later in the week.'* (Humanities teacher)
>
> *'Students are vocabulary sponges – now if someone uses a word they don't know they ask for definitions!'* (English teacher)
>
> *'We learn best when we can discuss and debate… we get to share our ideas and if you're not sure of something you can get it from others in the group.'* (Year 7 student)
>
> *'If we need to gather our ideas, we talk about new ideas and they'll go "Oh, I can use that" and you get to leave the discussion with even more ideas.'* (Year 9 student)

4.2 How does participation in disciplined discussion and debate impact on proficiency in spoken English?

In both schools, students were assessed as speakers and listeners at regular intervals during the course of the project. Judgements were based on level-related criteria which were specifically written to match the focus of the project on discussion and debate. The criteria for level 6 indicate the level of proficiency and skill that Year 7 students at Oxford Spires were working towards, and which the majority of Year 9 students at St Mark's had achieved.

A student achieving level 6a in speaking and listening can demonstrate the following:

- uses evidence and gives reasons for viewpoints

- uses a range of strategies to engage with and persuade listeners, including pacing and tone of voice, and non-verbal features (for example eye contact or gesture)

- challenges and presents alternative views, in a courteous and appropriate manner

- adopts a range of roles in discussion and debate, showing some evidence of independent decision-making

- evaluates own and others' contributions to discussion and debate, making reference to strengths and areas for improvement.

4.2.1 Progress in speaking and listening at Oxford Spires Academy

The table below shows progress in speaking and listening during the period of the Talking School project, from January to July 2012, for a sample group of Year 7 students at Oxford Spires Academy.

Table 3: Progress in speaking and listening at Oxford Spires Academy

Name	Speaking and listening January	Speaking and listening July	Progress: sub-levels
Student A	4b	6b	6
Student B	4a	6b	5
Student C	4b	5c	2
Student D	5c	6a	5
Student E	5c	6b	4
Student F	5c	6c	3
Student G	5c	6a	5

National expectations (based on DfE levels of attainment) indicate that 'good' progress equates to two sub-levels per year.

- All students in the sample group made at least two sub-levels of progress – which is the national expectation for one year. Five made at least double this rate of progress, and one, Student A, progressed from level 4b to 6b.

- This progress was mirrored in the class as a whole, where 75% of students made progress in speaking and listening by at least three sub-levels. 45% made at least four sub-levels of progress – i.e. they achieved more than one full level of progress over the course of two terms.

> *'Initially I was differentiating via table groups, with slightly different work, but there was always a whole-class dialogue going on as well, enabling all to access and contribute to high quality discussion… so I thought, right, I'm going to start from the top, with the challenge of high quality of work and outcomes for all, which has enabled some students to progress massively, especially those who were at level 4 at the start of the year.'* (English teacher)

4.2.2 Progress in speaking and listening at St Mark's Academy

Data from the English department's assessment of students' attainment in speaking and listening at St Mark's Academy shows less dramatic gains over the short period of the project (January – July). This is possibly due to the progress that the majority of the sample group had already made prior to the start of the study: four were already assessed as working at level 7 and two at level 6 at the start of the work. However, all had made at least one sub-level of progress six months later.

With this Year 9 class, many of the skills and competences that the Year 7 students at Oxford Spires were making such headway with were already present. More significantly, the key gains for the older students were in their overall confidence and willingness to participate in more public, or unfamiliar contexts – and in using their skills in discussion and debate to deepen their understanding of issues and topics in RE and drama. As with the younger students, participating teachers noticed that students were much more willing to listen to each other in a supportive way, more prepared to entertain that an issue might be capable of having several different, valid viewpoints, and much more positive about the value of debating a topic in order to learn more about it.

'I like arguing for the other viewpoint… it gives you a stronger conclusion at the end, as you think of others' ideas and solutions. We also have to use the knowledge we've just gained to argue for the other side.' (Year 9 student)

'Lessons have become more fruitful. The teachers are interested in the students' point of view. There's more challenge now… Challenge is where we have to learn to do things that we aren't good at… like when we are asked to talk for one minute on the topic, or to be ready to answer a question with our ideas or arguments… when the teacher says she's going to ask us, I start thinking about what I might say, building up arguments in my head.' (Year 9 student)

'If you've got good debating skills, if you can reason with someone in a well-mannered way, you can persuade them… and if you question them, they give you more ideas…' (Year 9 student)

A recent Ofsted monitoring inspection visit to St Mark's Academy noted the relationship between a heightened, more carefully planned approach to discussion and debate and improvements in the quality of teaching:

'In the stronger lessons, the good pace, along with high-level probing questions, enables students to enjoy learning and do their best. For example, in a good religious education lesson, four students presented their arguments on the topic of crime and punishment to their peers as part of the lesson's 'ethical courtroom'. Students researched the basis for their presentations quickly and effectively and they spoke articulately.' (Monitoring Inspection of St Mark's Church of England Academy, Ofsted, March 2012)

4.2.3 Aspects of spoken language proficiency

Participating teachers in both schools identified the following aspects of spoken language proficiency as particularly evident:

- Willingness to express an opinion, to 'speak out', and to be prepared to engage with each other in some unfamiliar situations

- An increased maturity, willingness to listen, and respect for each other's opinions

- Students who are proud of, and able to talk about, the skills they are developing, and keen to display them, for example with Year 6 children at a local primary school

- Greater use of more formal, academic vocabulary; and students structuring what they are saying

- Students adopting an approach known as 'tracking' – where students are shown how to 'visibly follow' what someone else is saying, by looking intently at them, responding by murmuring agreement or disagreement, processing what they are hearing, and then offering a response – either a question or an additional comment. Proficient adults do this, often unconsciously, but school students usually do not, and especially not in classroom settings (where it could be argued that they have 'unlearned' the skill). Students can be supported in learning to use 'tracking' by being given explicit models, and then regular prompts, reminders and reinforcement.

- Increased attention to the words of others, and the respect this confers on the speaker, which also leads to improvement in students' writing.

'The students attach much more value to talk. They now see the difference between academic talking and its value, as opposed to social talk… they are starting to see the difference between helpful and unhelpful talk.' (English teacher)

'They all have opinions and like to express them. They have realised that their own opinion is valuable, and they are starting to value others' opinions as well. If they criticise, they do so on the basis of the points that have been made.' (History teacher)

'They are developing the ability to do something with an opinion – formalising it, rounding it, developing it for the purposes of debate.' (RE teacher)

'Students have started to get the idea that there are always more than one, or even two sides to a debate, and that ideas and opinions that others don't share can still have validity.' (History teacher)

'Their spoken language has improved dramatically… I've noticed improvements in their grammatical construction; they make greater sense, self-correct, or offer supportive corrections to each other.' (English teacher)

4.2.4 Changes in attitude and confidence

As well as evidence from assessment of improved skills, students benefited in other ways from the increased exposure to, and use of, productive talk and discussion.

For example, the focus class at Oxford Spires Academy completed a short attitudinal questionnaire at the start of the project in early January 2012, designed to establish a baseline set of data for comparison at the end of the initiative, in July 2012.

The responses provided a snapshot of attitudes and are an indication, from the students' perspective, of changes in attitude, confidence and proficiency:

- In the initial survey, 33% of the class felt that they were an excellent speaker. By July, this had increased to 58%. 48% placed themselves as average or below in January; this had decreased to only 15% by July.

- In the initial survey, 48% indicated that they 'loved speaking', but 48% placed themselves as average or below (19% were 'below', and 19% indicated that they did not like speaking much at all). By July, 63% indicated that they loved speaking, 31% were average or below, and none placed themselves in the 'don't like' category.

- The 30% who thought they were excellent listeners had increased to 58% by July, with the 30% average or below reducing by half.

- In January, just over half of the class indicated that they liked listening to others; by July, this had increased to 74%, with all the class marking themselves as at least average.

One of the most noticeable changes in attitude was the increased percentage of students who indicated that they were much more positive about listening to others. This emerged in many of the comments as well: several students said that what had helped them to improve (both as spoken language users, and in other work) was their improved listening, especially their willingness to listen to each other. This is borne out by all of the lesson observations.

A distinct feature of the Talking School project in both schools was the significant difference in students' willingness to listen to one another, and the increased levels of interest and respect shown. As one student put it (in response to the question 'What helped you to improve?'): '*Listening to others, listening to their ideas*'. Several students mentioned 'tracking' as a specific skill that they'd learned and were now using. Disciplined discussion and debating provide students with quite specific, rigorous 'ground rules' that they can learn to adhere to. They have been taught how to listen, and a consequence of that is that they are also learning to respect and value each other.

'The academy has put a strong emphasis on developing students' oracy skills, which is evident in those lessons where students can engage in class and group discussions and answer questions.' (Monitoring Inspection of Oxford Spires Academy, Ofsted, April 2012)

4.3 Does increased proficiency in discussion and debate of ideas result in improved writing?

The relationship between talk and writing is not a simple matter of transferring ideas and experiences which have been initially considered and conveyed in talk, straight across into writing. The two language modes operate under similar but different rules and structures. The resources that a speaker can use (such as pace, pitch, pausing and gesture) and the immediate presence of a listening audience are not available to writers. In addition, the processes that an individual uses to generate language are quite different. Consequently, we should not expect that there be a direct and immediate transfer from speech into writing. For example, there are individuals who are adept at constructing and conveying meaning through talk who are not able to reproduce that in writing – and vice versa.

And yet it also seems self-evident that there must be some element of transfer from the use of disciplined discussion – with its emphasis on clarifying or extending meaning, on drawing out key learning points and summarising so that all can benefit – which has a pay-off in terms of achieving similar outcomes in writing.

4.3.1 Discursive writing analysis at Oxford Spires Academy

At Oxford Spires Academy, two independent writing tasks, with a six-month gap between each, were analysed. The first was a discursive essay: 'Should mobile phones be allowed in school?' which was set in January 2012. The second was a history essay set in June 2012: 'Why did William become the king of England?' This second was the culmination of a series of lessons focusing on learning about the 1066 period, during which students were engaged in a series of discussions and a formal debate prior to being set the essay.

The analysis evaluated key aspects of writing, using level-related criteria written for the project.[7] For the majority of the sample of students there was evidence of a rapid improvement in the quality and content of their writing over the six-month period, as shown in the table below:

[7] For more details see *Developing the Talking School: Guidance for teachers*.

Table 4: Analysis of progress in key aspects of writing in humanities at Oxford Spires Academy (January 2012 – June 2012)

Name	AF3 Organise and present whole text; sequencing and structuring information		AF4 Construct paragraphs: cohesion within and across		AF5 Vary sentences for clarity and purpose		AF6 Technical accuracy		Overall		% complex sentences		Progress: sub-levels
	Jan	June	Jan	June	Jan	June	Jan	June	Jan	June	Jan	June	
Student A	4c	4a	4a	5c	4b	4a	4a	4a	4b	4a	45%	34%	1
Student B	3a	5c	3a	4a	4a	4a	4c	4a	4c	4a	25%	69%	2
Student C	4b	4b	4a	4a	4b	4b	4c	4c	4b	4b	0%	39%	0
Student D	4a	6b	5c	5a	5c	6c	4a	6b	5c	6c	60%	40%	3
Student E	4c	4a	4c	4a	4b	4a	4a	4a	4b	4a	30%	50%	1
Student F	4b	4a	4c	4a	4c	4c	4c	4c	4c	4b	50%	83%	1
Student G	4b	5a	4b	4a	4a	5a	5a	4a	4a	5b	50%	75%	2

The majority of students made progress that was in line with national expectations, and three exceeded this. The tasks that they were assessed on were limited, however, to the more challenging discursive writing, so this is not an assessment of their overall progress across a full range of writing purposes.

A closer analysis of *qualities* in the writing points to the impact of the increased use of debate and discussion. The most recent writing from both groups of students (June 2012) displayed marked improvement in some specific aspects:

- **Overall organisation of ideas and content**
  There was evidence of the following aspects:

  – Prioritising arguments and evidence into main and subsidiary points.

  – Increased use of balanced sentences that convey an understanding of an idea or issue in the round (for example: *'Secondly, William had better leadership over his army than Harold because he had more experience and was a braver soldier in battle.'* (Year 7 student, Oxford Spires Academy) and: *'Nonetheless, Harold Hardrada, King of Norway, believed that since England was ruled by Vikings and now that King Edward had died, Vikings should start ruling England again.'* (Year 7 student, Oxford Spires Academy)

  – Extended reasons and use of logical arguments to reinforce a key point.

– Strong topic sentences at the start of paragraphs, and well-constructed closing sentences at the end – evidence that the writer has a meta-understanding of the direction of the writing, and an ability to signal this to the reader. Students demonstrate a growing ability to see writing as a public, not private, utterance, which may also have something to do with the emphasis on speaking with authority and listening with intent.

– Increased formality – a combination of vocabulary and a more assured use of connectives to bind ideas together. More are using connectives appropriately, even naturally – there is little of the artificiality of connective/conjunction use that comes from over-rigid use of writing frames. Many are starting to adopt a more assured impersonal tone in their writing.

- **Use of complex sentence structures**
  This may be directly related to students' increased ability, developed through debate, to hold the line of an argument in their heads, to think on their feet, and to respond to challenge and questioning. These oral debating skills train the mind in developing reasons and drawing on a range of evidence. Also, through active, engaged listening, students have been exposed to a wider range of views, opinions and evidence which they can then draw on in their writing.

  However, this is not the whole story. Two students at Oxford Spires, A and D, reduced the percentage of complex sentences that they used. This is likely to be as a result of the writer making better use of a greater variety of sentence structures to convey ideas and construct an argument – for example, making really effective use of simple sentences as the final sentence in a paragraph to sum up and convey the main point, or deploying a series of effective compound sentences to convey a chronological summary of the Battle of Hastings. Student D in fact attained the highest level in the sample group, and is clearly a mature and sophisticated writer.

  An increase in the frequency and number of complex sentences is a marker of improvements in the ability to handle complexity, to develop reasons and justifications, and to marshal a wider range of ideas in support of an argument. However, writers who are more proficient will then start to use a greater variety of sentences as their control over the shape and structure of a complete text improves.

- **Organising a whole text, structuring information and ideas into paragraphs to guide the reader through the steps in an argument**
  Some students have moved on more than a whole level in these aspects of writing (for example students B, D and G at Oxford Spires). The emphasis on using debates and discussion as a teaching and learning strategy, focused on understanding all sides and shades of opinion and viewpoints ('constructive controversy') is leading to significant gains in these aspects of writing. In terms of literacy and learning, it is the ability to structure and organise ideas that will equip students for effective progress across the curriculum. In addition, students are learning how to think logically and communicate complex ideas.

4.3.2 Discursive writing analysis at St Mark's Academy

At St Mark's Academy, analysis of students' discursive writing reveals similar evidence of improvement in their ability to structure and organise their ideas over the period of the project. In addition, the most recent students' writing shows evidence of their ability to drive home a point of view in a clear and cogent way, using rhetorical devices that have grown out of the regular opportunity to debate ideas orally prior to writing. The following examples are taken from an English essay in which students discussed to which of three films they would award an 'Oscar':

'Dark and sinister, the producers of 'Dark Knight' create a strange world which hasn't yet been seen by any action movie. The historic setting of 'X-Men' catches the eye for many older audiences. The humour of 'Hancock' and the simplicity of characters appeal to a younger audience. The beginning of all three films tells us about the type of film it's going to be, for instance 'Hancock' starts with a drunk man, living on the streets. This is a very different way of starting an action movie as the hero isn't how the audience would expect him to be. Interestingly, 'X-Men' uses a more historic beginning in World War 2 which may seem rather odd. You may be wondering 'how is there going to be an action movie in a Nazi concentration camp?' **(Student F)**

'Has it ever occurred to you why no action movie has ever won an Oscar? Maybe it is because they rarely have the gothic hero storyline of Christopher Nolan's Dark Knight. Or is it because don't have their own style of committing crime like the Joker...?'

(Student D)

This direct address to the reader shows an increased sense of writing having a clear purpose. Many young writers find it hard to envisage a 'relationship' between what they write and its effect on an unknown, distant readership. There is evidence from the writing that this relationship is more strongly envisaged and results in better focused, direct, forthright expression. There is evidence from this writing task that the students are developing a strong sense of 'audience', as shown through the use of rhetorical devices to engage and persuade a reader. It is likely that this is a result of using these kinds of rhetorical flourishes in debate with a live audience, and because of the greater formality of language being developed in debating, this transfers more easily into the written word.

> *'Our spoken language is improving faster than our writing… it's to do with how you put together your ideas… this is a tad harder in writing than in talking.'* (Year 9 student)
>
> *'I've started to think about what I write, how to get my meaning across clearly.'* (Year 9 student)

4.3.3 Summary: what is revealed about the relationship between talk and writing?

In both schools, analysis of these aspects of students' writing indicates that they were positively influenced by the increased, sustained opportunities to rehearse ideas through discussion and debate, and to listen to others' ideas. It was also a consequence of teaching which placed an emphasis on the generation of ideas, focused on students providing reasons and justifications, and encouraged students in debate to:

• identify the main points in an argument

• gather subsidiary and supporting ideas

• structure these into a coherent explanation, or a series of connected points.

There is not a 1–1 or direct transfer from talking into writing because there are different skills involved. However, students have a greater bank of ideas, are more able to structure and organise ideas, and to think round and through a topic that can be transferred into their writing. For example, in English lessons at Oxford Spires, students were encouraged to rehearse their ideas for key points in a piece of discursive writing in talk first. The teacher calls this practice 'oral essays' and students value the chance to 'listen' to themselves and each other before starting to put pen to paper.

> *'It's not simply a matter of learning skills; writing discursively is also a matter of learning to think, to structure and organise ideas.'* (English teacher)
>
> *'Their writing is helped because they have a bank of knowledge to use; an idea of what they need to do… and now they are able quickly to grasp what a task is asking of them, and can articulate their ideas better as a result.'* (History teacher)

4.4 What kinds of teaching strategies for discussion and debating skills make the most difference?

The study concluded in each school with a detailed review, in which the participating teachers discussed the approaches they had been developing and considered which had most positive impact on students. This section summarises their conclusions.

4.4.1 Students benefit from consistency of teaching approach within and across lessons
This can be achieved in the following ways:

- Discussing with, and communicating to students a set of clear 'ground rules' for discussion and debate

- Providing explicit feedback to students, including regular, informal positive reinforcement of what is expected, for example: 'That's a really good way of setting out your main argument'

- Introducing students to, and using a common language to describe, key features of discussion and debate such as: motion; proposition; opposition; evidence; rebuttal; summary; point of information. Students enjoyed knowing and using this more formal language.

4.4.2 Students benefit from specific teaching activities
Examples of these included:

- Placing a 'sticky note' onto a whiteboard with 'Agree' / 'Uncertain' / 'Disagree' at the start of a lesson in response to a big question on the board

- Taking a place by standing in line on an 'Agree–Disagree' continuum

- Sharply timed discussions (such as the '90-second debate')

- Passing on a tennis ball or hedgehog/fluffy toy as a visible indicator of who has the next turn to speak – a simple 'conch' that confers authority on the holder

- 'Oral essays' – giving students quick-fire opportunities to precede and prepare for writing by talking through the main points and structure of an argument, in pairs or small groups

- Using as a starter provocative, baffling questions without a simple or obvious answer, for example: 'Who owns water?'

- 'Stop the clock' – pausing the action at key points in a debate, to make a key teaching point or to refocus on the direction to go in.

4.4.3 Students are more likely to extend their thinking if asked to extend and elaborate on their initial ideas
The most effective examples of this usually occurred when the teacher skilfully challenged an individual – either as part of whole-class teaching and learning, or in a small group, by asking, for example: 'Why do you think that?' 'Can you explain why you would say that?' 'What evidence do you have for thinking that?' 'Can you extend what [student X] has just said?' 'Do you agree with what [student X] has just said? Explain why/why not.'

The key impulse here is to expect students to contribute more than a single utterance, by saying, for example: 'Can you put that into a full sentence for me, please?'; or by setting a specific challenge, asking for considerably more, for instance: 'OK, you have one minute to make at least three key points that back up your position/argument'.

4.4.4 Students are more likely to use more formal language, and to listen with intent, when they are placed in 'expert' roles

This means giving students specific responsibilities, by placing them in roles that require them to talk and listen as 'experts'. The responsibility that a specific role confers on an individual leads to them making a greater effort to talk in specific ways, or to adopt a new register – for example to be more formal, or deliberate in choice of vocabulary, or tone.

Examples of roles used in the project include:

- Envoys

- Questioners

- The conscience of a character

- Demonstrator/trainer

- 'Teaching' – for example in a small group

'Students can be told… "I know you're doing xxx in another subject", which helps… especially when students realise that you are talking to each other.' (English teacher)

'There is a formula we all use when we are going to debate something… a process students go through, that they've all got used to.' (Science teacher)

'The greater oral emphasis makes learning and attainment more publicly available and evident – which leads to a greater element of challenge. They expect to be asked (e.g. in "no-hands questioning") to explain their thinking… and if you don't ask them, some of the class look disappointed!' (Drama teacher)

4.5 What impact did the Talking School project have on teachers?

One of the subsidiary aims of the Talking School project was to support the participating teachers in extending their repertoire of teaching strategies through professional learning and action research, promoting leading-edge practice.

The teachers in both schools committed time to engage in a range of collaborative planning, observation and review that ensured that students benefited from the high-quality teaching approaches outlined in the previous section. In addition, the teachers benefited professionally, learning new approaches, sharpening teaching skills, and responding to student feedback so that lessons could be adjusted in the future. These collaborative activities included:

- Initial data review and planning an overall approach

- Training in debating skills

- Joint planning of lessons

- Observing lessons, focusing on the target group of students

- Joint review of lessons, discussing what worked best for the focus group, leading to planning next steps

- Reflecting and reviewing lessons through keeping an online blog.

The quality of professional learning was high, and is a further reason, as well as the impact on students, that enabled teachers in the two schools to sustain this level of additional work alongside their regular teaching commitment. Some additional funding was available to each school to support planning and coordination, amounting to about 16 supply days per school (£2,400). This investment would appear to be good value for money, given the gains in student progress and attainment, and the value for the participating teachers.

As well as learning new approaches, all of the teachers commented on how they also were more prepared to 'take risks' – by which they usually meant being willing to try out a teaching approach that they would not have tried before. A good example of this was the 'Agree–Disagree continuum' which involved confronting students with a challenging question (such as: 'Is fame the best thing that could happen to anybody?') and asking them to take up an initial position by standing in a line – strong agreement or disagreement at each end of the line, shades of opinion towards the middle. Observing a teacher using this technique, then discussing its impact, led other teachers to incorporate it into their lessons.

In this way, changes in practice are more likely to be embedded, as they are subject to a professional process of trial and error, supported by the collaborative process of learning and professional trust that has been established.

'My risk-taking has improved... I'm more willing to try different approaches... for example, there's a lot more getting students out of their seats, allowing a lesson to travel through greater amounts of discussion and debate, with a greater degree of handover to the students.' (History teacher)

'Learning how students can work well, how they respond to different activities... the different variables that determine how a lessons can go well (or not)... it's encouraging, discussing with colleagues, and from different subjects as well.' (RE teacher)

'My teaching has improved throughout the year because there's been an explicit focus on these aspects... we are all more aware of what's going on in the rest of the school... we are using a common language to describe learning... it's creating a greater focus on the student.'
(English teacher)

*'There's more variety in my teaching, as I'm able to compare what I do with what others do...
I never really put importance on speech within a lesson, and always looked for evidence of
outcomes afterwards in their writing. Now I'm more aware of the evidence of what students are
learning in their talk within a lesson.'* (Science teacher)

*'We have conversations where I say "I've tried this…" and someone will say "Try this or that…"
We share our experiences, and we know where we are going right and wrong… because the
initiative is new to everyone, it's brought us together.'* (Year 7 tutor)

5 Conclusions and recommendations

This small-scale initiative produced some very positive results for the students. It also led to the participating teachers gaining from the opportunity to work closely together and to learn from one another. A key feature of this professional learning was a focus on observing a selected group of students in lessons, in order to evaluate the day-to-day impact of a changed teaching approach. Schools adopting a similar approach will need to invest in additional time for teachers in order to ensure that there is adequate time for planning and classroom observation. Because the emphasis is on developing oral interaction and students' oral skills, evidence of progress in learning, and of improved skills, is fleeting and hard to capture, so lesson observation is an essential element.

The evidence suggests a number of recommendations for schools:

- Build regular opportunities for sustained discussion and debate into the curriculum at Key Stage 3 by identifying:

  - a small group of teachers from different subjects (a minimum of three, including English) who are willing to work collaboratively

  - appropriate aspects (topics/themes/concepts/skills) within each scheme of work that can be taught through discussion and debate

  - where there are opportunities to make cross-curricular links, so that students encounter common approaches and expectations across subjects.

- Consider starting with Year 7 so that students can be supported in developing a set of skills and competences that can be progressively taught across the whole of Key Stage 3.

- Trial, develop, refine and adjust teaching approaches with the initial group of teachers, prior to scaling up the approach – within subjects and also more widely across the school.

- Complement the focus within the curriculum by setting up other opportunities for students to engage in debate through, for example, establishing a school debating club and entering debating competitions.

- Consider making some additional time available for the initial group of participating teachers for essential cross-curricular planning, lesson observation and review which acknowledges the approach as an effective approach to professional learning.

- Ensure that evidence of impact on student attainment and progress is planned for from the start.

6 Appendix: Lesson Study

Lesson observation and feedback, and collaborative planning, are highly effective forms of professional development. Working with a coach who can draw on their wider experience and expertise, and sensitively offer support and challenge to teachers as they seek to make improvements, is also very helpful. A recent approach, called Lesson Study, offers a structured way of enquiring into one's own teaching, and supporting others engaged in a similar approach. It is a very good way of considering and then implementing aspects of teachers' behaviour in the classroom that is often *instinctive* – for example asking questions; responding to students' answers; giving students feedback on their work; or managing the behaviour and learning activities of a whole class. The key feature of Lesson Study is that it encourages teachers, working together ideally in pairs or groups of three, to reflect critically on their own and others' classroom practice, and to work together to find new ways that increase the positive impact on students' learning.

Lesson Study represents an approach that fosters the collective development of highly-crafted lessons. It forms the crux of school improvement in Japan. In Lesson Study, groups of teachers meet regularly over long periods of time (ranging from several months to a year) to work on the design, implementation, testing and improvement of one or several research designs (*kenkyuu jugyou*).

Lesson Study in a nutshell

- A group of teachers (either teaching the same subject, or from across subjects) identifies a common issue that affects student learning. This becomes the focus for the Lesson Study.

- A small number of students are identified as the 'case study' group.

- The group of teachers jointly plans a series of lessons.

- A lesson (or lessons) from each teacher in the group is observed by his/her colleague(s).

- The focus of the observation is on the students' learning.

- Observations of student learning behaviour – especially where a teaching approach or classroom activity was successful in promoting learning, or where it wasn't – are shared and discussed in a non-judgmental way. The emphasis of the discussion is on: 'What worked well, and why?'

- Future lessons are planned, and participating teachers are encouraged to practise new skills and to closely observe the effect on students' and their own learning.

- The cycle continues; ideally there should be at least three cycles.

- 'Findings' are shared more widely across the department or the whole school. Typically this is through a presentation at a staff training day or regular staff meeting; or through video of key moments in lessons; and through a short write-up of the Lesson Study focus, which draws out implications for everyone's teaching approach.

Lesson Study promotes professional dialogue between teachers, and helps to make teachers' understanding of what works for student learning, and the effect of specific teaching approaches, publicly accessible and available. It takes place over a period of time, and allows teachers to

experiment with new skills and strategies, and evaluate what works and why. It builds in good levels of support and help from other colleagues through shared planning and development of materials and lessons, linked with focused observation. In other words, Lesson Study incorporates many of the approaches to professional development that have been seen to be highly effective. It depends on schools having made a commitment to becoming a professional learning community where such 'home-grown' approaches to professional learning, built on a 'peer coaching' model, are valued and supported.

Lesson Study:

1. 'Deprivatises' the classroom

2. Makes teaching public

3. Allows for multiple perspectives on learning and what works well and why

4. Creates joint ownership of teaching

5. Sharpens the focus for enquiry on students – a 'case study group' – and deflects attention from the teacher

6. Fosters 'meta-knowledge' among teachers that can be applied elsewhere

7. Encourages high-quality, precise dialogue about learning and teaching

8. Effects lasting changes in practice.

Key questions[8] for a Lesson Study group:

1. What teaching practices will I continue to use because I have seen other teachers using them effectively?

2. What teaching strategies that I currently use will I re-examine?

3. What strategies have I not used but I will now attempt because I have seen them used effectively by other teachers?

4. What part of our team-developed lesson plan worked well, and why?

5. What part of our team-developed lesson plan did not work as well as we had hoped, and what might we do to change it?

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[8] Adapted from Chapter 7: 'Ensuring Effective Instruction' in *Leaders of learning* (DuFour and Marzano, 2011).

'Lesson Study' – a case study from St Mark's Academy – a teacher's perspective

Overview

We have used Lesson Study to allow us to develop a better understanding of the learning strategies we can employ to ensure that learners within Year 9 are motivated, engaged and challenged to learn through talk, and to develop as speakers and listeners across humanities, English and creative arts. To gain such understanding, we were granted time by our school's senior leadership team to set up a cycle of collaborative planning sessions, joint observations, and reflective review discussions to plan and reflect upon the learning of eight students across these subjects. This is 'Lesson Study' in action.

Methodology

Evidence for this piece of practitioner research was gathered through a range of data collection methods. This way we could ensure that evidence was triangulated to give us insight into pupil achievement and practice from a range of angles.

After each collaborative planning session, one practitioner would then teach the lesson, while the other two observed pupil behaviour and learning. Therefore, the first way we collected evidence was through three joint observations: one in RE, one in English and one in drama.

A sample of eight students was used, which meant that the observers could focus on four students each during an observation. Written notes were taken, recording pupil engagement, learning and contribution during different learning activities.

Teacher reflections were shared through a post-lesson oral debrief within 24 hours of the lesson. These reflections were then typed onto a blog and made available for participants to see.

Finally, students were asked to keep a blog in response to four open questions recording their reflections on the lesson. Teachers had access to this blog.

Key findings

We have found that being able to plan collaboratively with two colleagues who have a similar vision for teaching and learning is invaluable. We are more willing to experiment with lesson ideas. If things go wrong, it does not matter, because colleagues have planned the lesson together. We all agree that taking new risks and trying out new learning activities have been incredibly satisfying in terms of professional development.

Having colleagues monitoring the learning of specific students has dramatically improved our understanding of individual needs. Asking students to keep a blog of each lesson and explain where they thought they learned best has also aided this crucial understanding and allowed relationships to develop and grow. Students felt valued that their teachers wanted to involve them in the planning, monitoring and review of their learning, and as a result motivation and engagement has increased.

What is important to remember as a teacher is that you, as well as your students, are constantly learning. This example of a 'learning community', where educators and students are asked to reflect on their practice, is a prime example of a small piece of research that has enhanced practice,

relationships and motivation and we would recommend that all schools develop this collaborative approach to the improvement of teaching and learning.

Reflection

As practitioners, we will take away a great deal from this project. Firstly it has taught us about the power of collaboration. Planning together provides an opportunity to share ideas, take new risks and build up a greater 'pool' of learning strategies to enhance the learning of all students.

Secondly, the research project has been invaluable in terms of allowing us to truly understand pupil needs. Student-teacher relationships have developed remarkably and the students involved have felt valued, increasing their sense of belonging and motivation to learn.

In terms of whole-school advice, we believe it is crucial for staff to be provided with more opportunities for collaboration. But most importantly, teachers will need to time to plan and reflect together rather than rush the process. We believe that the learning of both colleagues and students would be developed if our school could become a learning community where teachers and students collaborate together to plan, monitor and review our learning journey in small collaborative groups. After all, we are all learners together, so should have a stake in this process.

We would like to take this project further by introducing this model to other departments within the school. It is our belief that this example of Lesson Study should be a feature of every department and of the PGCE training programme within our school.

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