

ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP (APPG) ON ORACY

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ORACY, CLASSROOM LAYOUT AND COVID

This brief note, written at the suggestion of the enquiry chair, Emma Hardy MP, should be read in conjunction with my written submission of September 2019 and my oral presentation at the evidence session on 14 July 2020.¹ The note deals with just one issue: the relationship between the physical layout of classrooms, the quality of talk for learning and teaching, and the current need for pupils and teachers to maintain social distance.

In its *Guidance for Full Opening Schools* (7 September 2020) DfE advises, among its many measures for reducing Covid transmission risk, that:

Maintaining a distance between people whilst inside and reducing the amount of time they are in face to face contact lowers the risk of transmission. It is strong public health advice that staff in secondary schools maintain distance from their pupils, staying at the front of the class ... Schools should make small adaptations to the classroom to support distancing where possible. That should include seating pupils side by side and facing forwards, rather than face to face or side on, and might include moving unnecessary furniture out of classrooms to make more space.²

This and other measures in the DfE guidance will seem eminently sensible. But in the particular context of the Oracy APPG enquiry, and given that it is taking place while DfE and schools are making strenuous efforts to recover the ground lost since March 2020, it may be useful for the APPG to add this question to those it has already posed:

As schools return to a kind of normality after the Covid lockdown, how can they energise the character and quality of classroom talk on which the evidence shows that effective learning and teaching depend, while keeping their pupils and teachers safe?

This question requires discussion, not pontification, and encouraging such discussion is my aim here. The 'character and quality of classroom talk' referred to above is outlined in my main submission to this enquiry (see footnote 1).

Talk is shaped by many forces and factors. One of them is the physical setting in which it takes place, which in turn influences its dynamics. (The bipartite layout of the House of Commons encourages and indeed legitimates the adversarial and often eristic exchanges and binary argument in which some MPs delight but others deplore. That would be more difficult if seating were in the round and/or MPs sat where they liked rather than with their own kind). In respect of the DfE guidance on classroom layout, it would seem that many schools are interpreting 'teachers ... at the front of the class ... pupils ... facing forward' as requiring the once universal layout of desks or tables in rows, as opposed to the now more common arrangement, in pre-Covid primary schools at least, of tables

¹ <http://robinalexander.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/APPG-Oracy-submission.pdf>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools> (section 6b)

pushed together to allow seating and working in groups. At present, clearly, the latter is out of the question.

The current advantage of the first of these two arrangements is that it maintains social distance. It may also be perceived to enable the teacher to cover curriculum ground more speedily and efficiently, at a time when there is much catching up to do, by using direct instruction. That claim, we know, is open to question, while the disadvantage of desks/tables in rows facing 'the front' (i.e. the teacher and the whiteboard or screen) is that it signals, and permits, only a limited range of talk, especially by the pupil. Given that the Oracy APPG is being advised by many of its witnesses to encourage pupil talk of the richest possible diversity and quality this should be a matter of interest and perhaps concern; doubly so when children have been deprived by the pandemic not only of good quality pedagogical talk but also of the wider benefits of social and verbal interaction with their peers.

In fact, there are not two possibilities for classroom layout but three (at least). As I note elsewhere:

There are three basic options: tables arranged separately in rows, tables arranged side by side in a squared-off horseshoe, with the teacher on the open fourth side, or tables pushed together to seat small groups in what conference organisers fancifully call 'cabaret style'. Each strongly signals a particular pattern of talk and who controls it: teacher-controlled recitation³, instruction or exposition (rows), student-student small group discussion (cabaret), whole class collective interaction (horseshoe).

I add:

We have found that the horseshoe arrangement is the most flexible, for with minimal physical adjustment it allows whole class direct instruction, whole class collective discussion, and paired talk, while by the simple and speedy expedient of switching chairs to the inside of the horseshoe it also facilitates small group discussion.⁴

The horseshoe arrangement is in common use in several other countries and as a consequence of projects like the 2014-17 Education Endowment Foundation dialogic teaching trial mentioned in my main submission to this enquiry,⁵ it can now sometimes be found in the UK. In fact it came into prominence here, and achieved success, during the 1990s in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, where it was adapted from high-achieving schools in Germany and Switzerland. Roger Luxton (then Chief Inspector for that local authority and later its Director of Children's Services) and his colleague Graham Last reported that:

High quality talk and discussion involving the whole class predominates ... There is less embarrassment about speaking aloud to the whole class than frequently found in English classrooms ... The optimal room layout is the horseshoe arrangement of tables or desks, promoting as it does maximum but controllable interaction between pupils.⁶

³ The US term for the classic initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) exchange of closed teacher question, single, 'correct' answer and minimal (right/wrong) teacher evaluative feedback. As Lauren Resnick noted in her presentation to the Oracy APPG on 9 September, recitation, or teaching-as-transmission, is in most teachers' DNA and is therefore hard to shift.

⁴ Alexander, R.J. (2020) *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*, Routledge, pp 140-1.

⁵ Alexander, R.J. (2018) Developing dialogue: genesis, process, trial, *Research Papers in Education* 33(5), 561-98. <http://robinalexander.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/RPIE-2018-Alexander-dialogic-teaching.pdf>

⁶ Luxton, R.G. and Last G. (1997) *Under-Achievement and Pedagogy*, NIESR, pp 13-14.

Luxton, Last and their colleagues encouraged this layout as the necessary condition for what they called ‘interactive whole class teaching’, with the emphasis at least as much on the quality of interaction, and the involvement in such interaction of all pupils, as on the whole-class organisation (an emphasis that was missed by those who welcomed or criticised it as a return to chalk-and-talk: it was more sophisticated than that). However, as the earlier quotation shows, the other virtue of the horseshoe is that of the three basic layouts it is the most flexible. And critically at this time, in the horseshoe arrangement - unlike the other two - all the pupils can see each other as well as their teacher, so it enables and encourages talk of a collective, reciprocal, mutually-supportive and dialogic kind, including the discussion that we know to be so important to pupil learning, alongside the classic routines of teacher-led Q and A, exposition and instruction.

But, in the context of Covid, how safe is it? Much depends, of course, on the size and shape of individual classrooms and the amount of furniture they contain, though note that the DfE guidance quoted above advises removing unnecessary furniture to create space and this advice applies whatever layout is used. Having seen the horseshoe arrangement in productive use in classrooms in the UK and other countries, I suggest that in rooms of sufficient size it may be as safe as desks/tables in rows. Pupils sit side by side as required by DfE, and while they face each other and the teacher they do so not in unsafe proximity across their tables but at a distance across the width, length or diagonal of the room.

It may seem odd to devote an entire submission to this matter. But the quality of talk for learning and teaching cannot be understood, still less improved, in isolation from other essentials of classroom life. The physical layout of classrooms is just one of these. A weakness of some writing on oracy is that it may be persuasive on talk as such, but not so good on how talk relates to and is supported or inhibited by other aspects of pedagogy like space, time, pupil grouping, curriculum content, task, learning activity, assessment, and the rules, routines and rituals that bind all these together.⁷

As I say, I raise this issue in the hope that it will generate discussion, especially among teachers and school leaders (public health advice would be useful too). Teachers are currently confronted by two imperatives: to keep their pupils and themselves safe, and to maximise the quality of the teaching and learning for which they are professionally responsible. In the modest matter of classroom layout there could well be more room for safe manoeuvre than the DfE advice may be *thought* to imply (for note that it does not actually instruct teachers to arrange desks/tables in rows).

In any event, we need to do everything we can to generate classroom talk of the kind and quality that the international evidence tells us is essential to children’s thinking, learning and understanding. At a time when the pandemic has denied children so much, we cannot deny them this too.

September 2020

⁷ Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy*, Wiley-Blackwell, pp 265-570; Alexander, R.J. (2020) *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*, Routledge, pp 124-168.