'All in favour, say I!' Voting in pupils' collaborative talk

Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education

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This paper draws on the findings of an ESRC and British Telecom funded project which explored the teaching of collaborative talk in the secondary English classroom. During the analysis of the video data collected, voting was observed as a strategy in pupils' collaborative decision-making. Converse to its democratic purpose, the vote was often initiated as a means of dominating or controlling the outcome of a collaborative task. Yet, some pupils challenged the use of the vote as their awareness of collaborative talk processes developed. In one group, the vote appeared to 'scaffold' the participation of a reluctant collaborator. Through the presentation of transcripts, this paper explores the nature and implications of the vote as used by pupils in collaborative talk. It contributes to understanding of pupils' independent talk in the classroom and prompts consideration of the vote as a productive tool in pupils' decision-making.

Key Words: collaborative talk, voting, secondary English teaching

Introduction

Collaborative talk involves sharing perspectives, negotiating and resolving differences to reach a conclusion which represents the shared meanings and understanding of participants (Wells, 2009). Studies continue to argue the learning potential of collaborative group interaction (Barnes & Todd, 1977; Alexander, 2004; Mercer & Littleton, 2007) and the importance of collaborative and communicative skills in adult life and in the workplace are widely recognised (Bercow, 2008; Cazden, 2001). Advocating group collaboration in the classroom signals a move away from individualistic forms of education and assessment (Webb & Palincsar, 1986). Group collaboration requires cooperation and a commitment to reconcile differences and achieve shared understanding: 'in a competitive situation others are

hoping that you will fail, whereas in a collaborative situation they are hoping that you will succeed' (Lloyd & Beard, 1995, 10).

John Dewey argued years ago, however, that schools undermine the social nature of community by promoting competition and individualism, stating that the key to maintaining democracy is knowledge of and fidelity to the laws of human nature in group settings (1900, 1956). More recently, Mercer expressed a similar sentiment: 'while the experience of everyday life supports the value of collaborative learning, educational practice has implicitly fought against it' (1995, 900). It remains that despite significant achievement almost always depending on the collaborative, communicative efforts of groups, individual talent is celebrated above that of collective effort (Mercer, 2000).

The value placed on individual performance is apparent in classroom interaction, which is characterised predominantly by teachers' elicitation of pupils' individual, correct responses (Myhill, 2006) and features few opportunities for peers to talk together (Baines, Blatchford & Kutnick, 2003). The recent omission of Speaking & Listening from weighted assessment at English GCSE (the public examination for 16 year olds in England) only devalues the role of pupils' talk further.

Despite efforts to support classroom talk (QCA, 2003, 2004), it is perhaps understandable that in this educational climate the pedagogical principles of collaborative talk are not realised in practice, and that pupils may even perceive collaboration as threatening to individual success. Exemplifying this, this paper reports on a recent study which revealed how pupils used voting to negotiate control of group decisions. Voting was used under the guise of democracy, but often served to promote individual preference. However, this study also suggests that through the explicit teaching of collaborative talk pupils can develop relationships and an awareness of collaborative talk processes which increases their

commitment to reciprocal dialogue and shared goals. This paper argues therefore that teaching collaborative talk explicitly in the secondary English classroom is a valid pursuit and a means of supporting pupils' achievement of *genuinely* egalitarian, democratic dialogues.

Literature Review: Collaborative Talk and Voting

Barnes and Todd's seminal study (1977) made a distinction between two types of pupil talk: *presentational talk* which is sensitive to the needs of an audience and *exploratory talk* which involves the exploration of different perspectives and ideas. Expanding on this conceptualisation, Neil Mercer identified the characteristics of three discourse types commonly observed in pupils' talk: disagreement and individualised decision-making in *disputational talk*; passive and uncritical engagement in *cumulative talk*; and, constructive engagement in *exploratory talk* (1995). Building on these and other conceptualisations of productive dialogue (Resnitskaya et al, 2009; Michaels, O'Connor & Resnick, 2008; Brown & Palincsar, 1989; Azmitia, 1998), this paper draws on a study which describes collaborative talk as a process of *participating, understanding* and *managing*, placing emphasis on the need for speakers to manage contributions and drive discussion towards a conclusion which represents the understanding of all speakers (see Newman, 2014).

Interest in dialogic talk has reaffirmed the learning potential of reciprocal dialogue (Wegerif, 2007; Alexander, 2004; Freire, 2008). Reciprocity is central to collaborative engagement because group consensus is dependent upon shared understanding achieved through speakers' commitment to appreciating alternative views (Gadamer, 1989). However, while a synthesis of human understanding might be 'a convenient fiction' (Rommetveit, 1979, 161), the priority is the maintenance of a space for dialogue in which speakers *strive* for understanding. Cognitive growth does not result from sparse interaction and passive compliance but from

'the elaboration and justifications of certain positions' (Brown & Palincsar, 1989, 408). In describing a 'community of enquiry', Coles (1995) points at the difference between problem-solving through reciprocal dialogue and through voting:

> *'...a community of enquiry is achieved when children act cooperatively in the search for understanding... The differences though are not simply oppositional points of view eventually resolved in some sort of 'balanced' way (e.g. by democratic voting). Rather they are part of the dynamic of the continuing dialogue between positions which sees the possibility of increased understanding as an outcome ...competition among classmates making way for intellectual collaboration'* (ibid, 164-5)

Though the vote is also noted as incompatible with reasoned problem-solving by Heller and Hollabaugh (1992), few further references are made in the literature to voting in peers' discussion. Research tends to focus more on teachers' uses of the vote to elicit pupil responses; in particular, an increased use of Electronic Voting Systems in higher education (Kennedy & Cutts, 2005) and in the Mathematics classroom as a means of increasing interactivity (Springer & Dick, 2006). However, in the Citizenship classroom, Howard and Gill (2000) point at teachers' use of the vote for management purposes, stressing that children's understanding of democratic principles are not extended by its use. It is ironic to consider that despite aiming to promote interactivity, inviting pupils to vote in the classroom may amplify the well-documented IRF sequence (see Myhill, 2006), encouraging pupils' passivity and compliance.

Voting alone does not provide opportunities for the elaboration and justification of pupils' ideas and is not underpinned by the same principles as collaborative talk. The outcome of a vote cannot reflect the 'will' of a group (Levinne & Plott, 1977) but reflects a majority

preference. However, it is important to consider what the vote reveals about pupils' management of dispute. As Goodwin's ethnographic studies of children's talk indicate (see 1990), dispute amongst peers in its many forms is a process important in social organization and development. While this paper goes on to demonstrate how pupils in this study used the vote to secure individual preference, it also considers how the vote may represent a starting point in the development of groups' reasoned, collaborative decision-making.

Methodology

Because Primary aged pupils are the predominant focus of talk-related research, the wider study from which this paper draws explored the teaching of collaborative talk in the secondary English classroom. Underpinned by pedagogical principles, a 3-week collaborative talk teaching unit (9 lessons) was designed, to:

- Support pupils in forging positive relationships within their groups

- Support the development of a vocabulary for talking about talk explicitly

- Develop pupils' knowledge about talk and collaborative talk processes through the analysis of talk episodes

- Provide opportunities for groups to engage in well-structured tasks drawn from 'authentic' collaborative scenarios

- Support groups in reflecting upon and evaluating their talk

Each four part lesson followed the same sequence of tasks: warm-up, analysis, collaboration and reflection. Warm-up tasks were designed to highlight the features of collaborative talk while supporting group relationships. With reference to a 'framework' which outlined the features of *participating, understanding* and *managing* within collaborative talk pupils then analysed episodes of talk on video or as transcript. A subsequent, thematically linked collaborative task required groups to work independently for a sustained period. To conclude,

pupils reflected upon and evaluated their talk. As the scheme progressed, pupils were provided with fewer supportive materials, encouraging pupils to discuss the task requirements and manage their approach.

The scheme was taught in two co-educational comprehensive secondary school classrooms: to a high ability year 10 class (age 14-15) of 32 girls in Bayside College, and to a year 9 class (age 13-14) of 28 mixed ability, mixed gender pupils in Spring Lane College (not their real names). Pupils were arranged in groups of 4 prior to teaching and remained in these groups for the duration of the scheme, enabling an examination of the temporal and dynamic aspects of their talk (Mercer, 2008). The difference between classes and groups was not considered problematic; forming a contrived sample would have undermined the aim of the study to explore talk in the 'naturalistic' classroom.

Lessons were recorded in their entirety, resulting in a large data set of 135 hours of video. Recordings captured multiple perspectives: each group's interactions, whole class interactions and teachers' asides with separate groups and individual pupils. By changing and shifting the 'lens' through which phenomenon was observed, interpretations were informed by and aligned with multiple perspectives.

The data analysis focused on how, supported by the teacher and teaching materials, pupils' participation in collaborative talk changed over the duration of the scheme. Initially, a qualitative description was written of each group in each lesson to facilitate data immersion and create a contextual narrative. Subsequent discourse analysis of 5 groups (90 hours video) from each class involved inductive and deductive coding to capture the features of pupils' collaborative talk and to record additional or unexpected features, such as the focus of this paper: 'voting.' Episodes were then transcribed to exemplify themes which emerged during coding and to reposition the coding in context.

This temporal, multi-perspective and multi-dimensional approach to data collection and analysis was not a means of 'triangulation' but was sensitive to the 'context-bound and skilful character of social interaction' (Silverman, 1993, 158), strengthening the reliability of the findings. This study does not seek generalities, though it argues that 'uniqueness of context does not entail uniqueness in every respect' (Pring, 2000, 119). By exploring the development of collaborative talk in the naturalistic classroom, within its 'real' constraints, the study aimed to find similar features, 'particularising' effective approaches to its teaching. The transcripts which follow represent a small slice of the wider study; however, interpretations presented are underpinned by the broader foundation of analysis discussed here.

Findings

Despite no mention of it in the teaching unit, the following episodes from two groups in each class show how voting was used. Each group agreed upon a group name; these are presented here alongside lesson information.

Episode 1, Spring Lane College

> **The Superheroes: Stephanie, Dean, Harry and Jude**
>
> **Lesson 6: Pupils have been asked to rank superheroes according to their skills and then agree on a new super-group of 4.**
>
> Stephanie: I really dislike the idea about Iron Man being in the team at all, I really don't, look, who…look…we're going to have to do a vote on this. Right, who thinks that Iron Man should be in the team? (Harry puts his hand up)
>
> Dean: Who's Iron Man?
>
> Harry: This guy….

Stephanie: …Harry. Who thinks that he shouldn't be? (Jude and Dean put their hands up) Right, sorry Harry but you're out-voted. It's democracy.

Harry: But, no…if we keep him it's still a maybe…

Stephanie: …No, I didn't get Frankie so you don't get Iron Man (referring to her preferred choice in the X Factor task last lesson)

Stephanie states her objection to Iron Man being in their Superhero team and initiates a vote, allowing no 'space' for others to object to the strategy. Harry signals his preference for Iron Man. Dean's question reveals his lack of understanding and therefore his inability to partake in genuine agreement. Stephanie interrupts Harry's attempt to explain and seeks agreement from Jude and Dean who passively agree. When Harry objects, Stephanie refers to a decision made last lesson as an argument for her right to 'win' this lesson.

This episode is an explicit example of how some pupils used a vote to enforce personal preference. Stephanie justifies her vote as 'democratic', a principle of collaborative talk, but in fact uses it to manipulate and dominate the decision-making. However, some pupils were more subtle in their manipulation of the vote:

Episode 2, Bayside College

The Talkers: Carla, Ruth, Millie and Eloise

Lesson 8: Groups have been asked to discuss and agree on a concept for an iPad app.

Carla: I think we've got three slogans and they're all quite good but I think

we need to take a vote and see which one we like the best, so…

Millie, are you listening?

Millie: Yeah

Carla: So, we've got: 'Vegan: your dog will be begging for it' Anybody? No,

          ok. We've got 'Begging for vegan' Who likes that?

Eloise: I like that…

Carla: …and then you've got: 'Vegan: A walk on the vegan side.'

Eloise: I'm not sure about the first one but I like the second one

Carla: We've got to go for what's catchy: '*begging for vegan*' or a 'walk on

          the vegan side…'

Ruth :   I don't know, it was just a suggestion (referring to her suggested

          slogan: 'a walk on the vegan side') I don't really feel that…is it more

          related to dogs?

Carla: …which one sticks in your head more? '*Begging for vegan*' or a 'walk

          on the vegan side?'

Ruth :   You wouldn't have vegan would you? You would have a walk on the

          vegan side?

Eloise: I like the fact that people would walk on the vegan side…

Carla: …but if you have a walk on the vegan side they're not going to know

          what we're talking about

Preceding this episode, Carla suggested the slogan 'begging for vegan'. Here, she initiates a
vote and demonstrates some authority in demanding Millie's attention. Other pupils do not
respond automatically to Carla's request for a decision so she reformulates questions until her
preference is accepted.

The following 3 episodes show how another pupil controlled the talk with the use of a vote, but also how this authority was challenged as the unit progressed.

Episode 3, Bayside College

Team Gossip: Willow, Carrie, Lisa and Samantha

Lesson 5: the group have been asked to discuss a number of X Factor contestants and agree which 4 should form a new group.

Willow: Out of the boys, we have to decide on two boys. Ok, let's make

a vote. I vote Ryan

Carrie: I don't know, you guys go first

Lisa: Marcus

Carrie: I don't know! Ryan's a good singer, so's Marcus…

Samantha: They're really similar

Willow: Choose!

Samantha: I'm going to go with Ryan

Carrie: Ok, I'll go with Ryan

Willow: So, two girls and two boys

After a quick review of the task, Willow initiates a vote without prior discussion. She initiates the vote and allows no room for objection by stating her preference in the same turn. Carrie's hesitation suggests that she is not ready to make a decision but Willow pushes her to choose. Carrie then concedes and Willow's choice 'wins.'

However, as the unit progressed, pupils in this group increasingly challenged Willow's authority:

Episode 4

Lesson 7: Pupils have been asked to discuss people voted the most influential in the world and rank their top 5.

Willow: Does everyone agree with what we've actually got? Are we all

                   agreed the Barack Obama should be the highest?

Samantha: But I think that Prince William and Kate are more influential than

                   Michelle Obama

Willow: Why do you think that?

Samantha: Well, because…think of all the people in America who watched

                   their wedding

Willow: I see what you mean but if you think about it, she can actually,

                   like, influence lots of people whereas…a lot of people like them

                   and respect them but I don't see how they can do much to

                   influence people

Samantha: Yeah, doesn't matter

Willow: Anyone else have any ideas?

Lisa: Samantha, stick by your ideas

Willow: To be honest, no one really cares that much anyway

In this episode, Willow begins by seeking agreement on their initial decision that Obama is the most influential person in the world. Samantha challenges the decision and Willow

demands an explanation to which Samantha responds reasonably. Willow's tone is confrontational and assertive, making it difficult for Samantha to persevere with her reasoning. When Samantha says 'it doesn't matter,' Willow requests further contributions.

Willow appears to be encouraging contributions and seeking agreement but in fact maintains her control over the discourse and rejects challenges. Pleasingly, and demonstrating a development in their talk, Lisa encourages Samantha to 'stick by her ideas' and therefore challenges Willow's authority, who attempts to undermine the validity of Lisa and Samantha's challenge by stating that 'no one cares.'

Episode 5

Lesson 8: The group have been asked to agree whether they will devise a concept for an iPad app or for a pet food brand

Willow: Ok guys, we need to decide…basically we need to decide pet food

            or APP

Samantha: Pet food, definitely pet food

Carrie: Yeah…Pet food would be easier…

Samantha: So, pet food or App?

Willow: I want to do an App

Carrie: I think an App would be better to do but harder

Willow: I think it would be better 'cause we would know what to do more

Samantha: I don't have Apps

Lisa: I don't

Samantha: My phone won't download them

Carrie: Let's take a vote. Pet food?

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Willow: Ok

Again, Willow initiates the need to make a decision. Samantha and Carrie state their preference to which Willow objects. Having established that Samantha and Lisa also want to focus on pet food, Carrie, adopting Willow's strategy, initiates a vote, allowing them to 'defeat' Willow who must then concede.

During this and the previous episode, pupils begin to challenge Willow's authority, supporting them in achieving more 'democratic' participation. The following episodes show how pupils in *The Lead Team* diminish the authority of the vote. To demonstrate *The Lead Team's* 'starting point', an episode from lesson 1 is first presented which does not feature the vote:

Episode 6, Spring Lane College

The Lead Team: Jordan, Charlie, Anne and Lauren

Lesson 1: The group have been asked to rank the items that would be most helpful in ensuring survival after a plane crash.

Charlie: A gun important, a small axe important…

Jordan: I would say the gun

Charlie: The gun, a small axe to cut things down

Jordan: No, how many objects do we need? Miss, how many objects do we need?

Charlie: You need an empty metal tin to keep food in…

Jordan: …no, first you'd need half a…

Charlie: …newspapers, no…

Jordan:	…no, first you'd need half a bottle of whiskey…
Charlie:	…to keep spirits up
Jordan:	Five large chocolate bars (writing down decisions)
Lauren:	Jordan! We're meant to all agree on them Jordan
Jordan:	To survive! To survive you need whiskey!

In this episode, Charlie begins by stating his choice for two items; Jordan's following contribution appears to signal agreement. Charlie repeats his choice and provides brief reasoning for the axe. Checking the requirements of the task, Jordan seeks the teacher's guidance immediately instead of asking the group or checking the task details on the desk. Charlie and Jordan then interrupt each other to suggest different items. Lauren attempts to manage Jordan's talk by reminding him of the need to reach a shared agreement. Jordan ignores this and continues to promote his suggestion. It is apparent in this episode, and in the one that follows, that Jordan, in particular, creates an obstacle to the group's talk.

Episode 7

Lesson 2: The group have been asked to discuss the 'ineffective' features of the collaborative talk seen in a video clip.

Teacher:	(circulating the room) Jordan, can I just clarify with you that all agreeing doesn't mean that you just tell them (walks away)
Jordan:	One could be not listening to each other. Agree?
Charlie:	Yeah
Jordan:	Raise your hands…I!
Charlie:	Tapping on the table

Jordan:	Ok, tapping on the table. Raise your hands in vote of tapping on the table
Teacher:	(returns) That's a lovely new theory you've got…Jordan, I'm proud
Jordan:	Talking over each other, raise your hands!
Charlie:	I!

Despite the teacher's reminder, Jordan controls the discourse in this episode. Jordan states a suggestion and seeks passive agreement repeatedly.

Although the teacher praises his use of the vote, this way of seeking agreement prevents pupils from challenging or exploring suggestions (note that Anne and Lauren are present but are silent throughout). However, unlike other groups, Jordan's strategy may serve to scaffold his participation. If we look at the group's talk during the first lesson, the use of the vote in the episode above demonstrates an awareness of the need to include other group members in the decision-making process. However, by lesson 6 there is a bigger improvement in the group's talk:

Episode 8

Lesson 6: The group have been asked to rank superheroes and agree on a new super-group of 4 superheroes

Charlie:	Have we decided on this order? Is there anything that's wrong?
Lauren:	I'm happy with this order
Jordan:	Yeah, I reckon that's a good order
Anne:	Actually, she's quite good

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Charlie: What does she do?

Jordan: She can turn invisible

Charlie: I think we should swap her for Ghostrider

Lauren: Yeah. Do you agree?

Jordan: Yeah…what does Ghostrider do?

Lauren: (Reads information from card)

Charlie: …maybe keep him there then.

Jordan: Ok, in favour of Iron Man first…I?!

Charlie: Uh…I reckon we should maybe think about Batman first

Jordan: Iron Man: he's got armour, he can fly, he's got guns, he's

                   got weapons, he's brave

Charlie: Yeah, I guess…

Not only are Lauren and Anne active participants but reasons are provided and questions asked before decisions are made. Furthermore, Jordan's request for agreement: 'in favour of Iron Man…I!?' is challenged by Charlie who suggests more consideration of the alternative, prompting Jordan to provide reasoning for his opinion.

Discussion

The episodes show that the decisions 'won' through a vote often initiated by dominant speakers do not represent the shared input and understanding of the group. Within these groups, the vote initially prompts passive agreement or conformity and the possibility of challenge and idea amendment is diminished as the dialogic space (Wegerif, 2007) is closed. Because the vote was used to enforce individual decisions, it may be considered a

'disputational' (Mercer, 1995) feature of pupils' talk; however, a temporal analysis of pupils' collaborative talk reveals how groups overcome the obstacles set by the vote and shed light on the forces which shape their discourse.

Recalling episode 7 (lesson 1), we first see how Jordan's dominance of the group is allowed to prevail, and how Charlie 'partakes' in this unconstructive discussion which silences Anne and Lauren. But in episode 8 (lesson 6), when Jordan initiates a vote, Charlie replies, *'Uh…I reckon we should think about Batman first'*, prompting Jordan to provide reasons for his preference. This brief episode shows how peers can scaffold each other's talk and consequent learning (Mercer, 2000). By prompting Jordan to elaborate, and supporting a space for other speakers to voice their thoughts, the group's collaborative talk is more likely to foster cognitive growth (Howe, 2010). And importantly, in challenging Jordan's vote, Charlie not only respects the shared responsibility and voice of the group, he is better able to assert his autonomy *within* a group which has established its own culture (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004) and discourse.

While similar developments can be seen in *Team Gossip* (episodes 3-5) a consideration of the classroom context brings to light the forces which may work against collaborative learning. In Bayside College, the class consisted of high ability girls for whom the validity of collaborative talk appeared particularly questionable. Willow and Carla (episode 2) were amongst the highest ability girls in the class. They interacted most frequently with the teacher and were eager to provide responses to her questions which would elicit praise and validation. Willow's use of the vote initially served to accelerate the collaborative talk process and side-step discussion, allowing her to seek the teacher's approval for their completion of the task. It is a significant leap to take from prioritising *individual* achievement and teacher validation to appreciating the potential of talk for *mutual* benefit. Making this leap is particularly challenging if teachers (perhaps unwittingly) encourage the belief that talk

is for finding correct answers, adversely affecting the ways peers use talk to explore understanding (Fisher & Larkin, 2008; Black & Varley, 2008; Pratt, 2006). It is apparent that the principles espoused in the classroom and implied through talk are not always compatible with fostering productive collaboration.

While the analysis of talk over 9 lessons may not represent a significant temporal analysis, the findings nevertheless reveal changes in pupils' interactions and draw attention to the complex contextual factors which shape discourse. What is at first 'disputational' is challenged by pupils as their awareness of the expectations of collaborative talk develop. This paper sheds light on peers' use of the vote as a strategy for resolving dispute, recognising that argument involves syntactic complexity and conceptual strategy (Goodwin, 1990). Nevertheless, it cautions the promotion of the vote alone for decision-making if the goal is reasoned discussion which supports learning:

> *'For a set of customs to acquire a new value in the eyes of autonomous conscience, it is not enough that these customs should be ratified after discussion by the majority of the sum total of individuals; this ratification must result from a genuine agreement founded on the laws of reciprocity which constitute reason'*   *(Piaget, 1965, 401)*

This paper also points at the importance of developing relationships and group identity, making commitment to a shared goal possible (Baines, Rubie-Davies & Blatchford, 2009). Taking these factors into account, the wider study from which this paper draws conceptualises the development of collaborative talk as a process of *familiarisation* and *orientation*, capturing how pupils align their talk expectations and become 'attuned' (Rommetveit, 1985) to each other before entering into *collaboration*.

Conclusion

To work towards a shared goal is to *participate* actively, to seek *understanding* and *manage* the tensions between shared and individual goals. It is a skilled activity which needs explicit teaching and practise. An educational climate which devalues the role of talk, and therefore the role of the questioning learner, is not one conducive to fostering these skills and understates their necessity. While promoting and broadening the potential of classroom talk may represent an 'ideological struggle' (Fisher & Larkin, 2008), the pedagogical principles of collaborative talk can be better realised if addressed explicitly and over time. While talk amongst peers does not always appear to be economical (Barnes, 1995), it is vital to recognise its potential as 'a cooperative effort yielding a communal harvest' (Barnes, Britton & Rosen, 1969, 110). In emphasising the role of collaborative talk in the joint meaning making process, and in supporting young people's capacity to open *for themselves* a space for dialogue, we recognise that, 'when children learn language, they are not simply engaging in one kind of learning among many; rather, they are learning the foundation of learning itself' (Halliday, 1993, 93).

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