

From “The Essential Speaking and Listening” by Lyn Dawes

Pre-publication text: Chapter 2: Talking Points

Teachers should deliberately encourage and support their pupils in developing an open and hypothetical style of learning (Barnes, 1992)

The important thing is not to stop questioning (Albert Einstein)

About Talking Points

Talking Points offer a strategy for stimulating speaking, listening, thinking and learning. Talking Points are basically a list of thoughts - statements which may be factually accurate, contentious or downright wrong. They provide a focus for speaking and listening and a chance to find out what others think. They can be thought-provoking, interesting, irritating, amusing, smart, simple, brief or wordy. Talking Points are easy to make up, read and understand, but offer ways in to thinking more deeply about the subject under discussion. They enable everyone to say what is in their minds, so that others can decide whether they agree or disagree.

So that there is a lot to talk about, there are always rather a lot of Talking Points.

Some groups become so involved that they never get to the end of the list – and this is good. High quality talk always takes time. Early finishers are offered a joint, creative task at the end of the list, which draws on their discussion and extends thinking. You may want to ask children to concentrate on particular points.

Before the discussion using Talking Points

Children work in groups. One child should be able to read the Talking Points on behalf of the others; if all are fluent readers, the group can take turns. They should be aware that speaking and listening, not reading, is the focus. It is everyone's responsibility to make sure that everyone else is asked for their opinion. Everyone must think about what is said, checking whether they agree or disagree, or can add further information. No time limit is set. Each group must monitor its own members, making sure that no-one is feeling left out, and that challenges are sensible and respectful of others. In particular, everyone is asked to give reasons for what they say. The question 'Why?' should occur constantly.

Groups should be aware that they will be asked to contribute to a whole class plenary, about two things; (a) the content of the Talking Points, and (b) how well the group talked and worked together. They should be able to identify and remember who asked a helpful question, changed their mind, encouraged someone else to talk, provided interesting ideas or information; and so on.

Children should know that they will only be asked for positive comments on one another's speaking and listening. Their explanation of difficulties should be reported objectively without apportioning blame; otherwise resentments may be taken out of the classroom. Children can learn to use language tools such as:

'My group found it hard to agree about..'

'We fell out about...'

'Our problem was...'

These help to indicate that it is the entire group that has to reflect and adjust, not just one problem child. Difficulties can be discussed and evaluated as a basis for developing new talk strategies to try out.

Make sure everyone understands the hand signal for ‘stop talking please’, and knows why it is important to co-operate in this way. Also make sure that children know that they should be talking to someone very near by at sensible volume.

During the discussion

Group discussion is a terrific opportunity to find out what children really think. It’s good to be drawn in to a discussion when you know that a word or a question will set off new and helpful trains of thought. It is often a good idea to chip in and move a group’s thinking along – but a light touch is required. Similarly, well-prepared Teaching Assistants can very well support, encourage and promote group talk.

Sometimes, groups will take the easy option and give surface answers, whizzing through the list of Talking Points with little engagement. The teacher can re-start the group on a particular point, asking for their ideas or reasons; or can ask the group to disband and become observant listeners to other groups, learning a more productive model of discussion for next time.

Talking Points Plenary Discussions

Take a Talking Point which has raised uncertainty or interest, and ask one group to explain their thinking about it. Draw on what you have heard during group work, and ask particular children to repeat what they said. Everyone should have something to say, so 'hands up' isn't necessary. Use the *nomination* strategy, which is to ask a child who has spoken to the whole class to choose who contributes next. Contributions may need summing up and rephrasing for clarity, but the discussion can proceed with children choosing who they think they want to hear from. Ask the class to choose girl-boy-girl and so on if you think necessary. This part of the lesson is a chance to give positive feedback on interesting ideas and clear thinking and reasoning.

Ask children if they heard the question '*What do you think?*'. Ask if everyone always agreed with what they heard, or did they have different ideas, and if so, how were they negotiated. Ask for examples of good listening, and interesting ideas. Ask if the children enjoyed talking together. Can they think of other times when the phrase '*What do you think?*' might be useful?

There is rarely time in class to deal with all the issues raised by all the groups for each Talking Point. Talking Points discussions often have an unfinished feel about them. There is benefit from having in mind questions which remain unresolved, or ideas raised that have created uncertainty. Individual learning can start from the friction of such 'wonderings' especially if children are encouraged to take their musings and queries away to share them with others.

Ask groups to provide information about how well they worked together. Children can give examples of good questions, changes of mind, asking for contributions, and so on, and you can show the child who has done these things how much you and the class value their contribution to the learning of others.

Groups who have had problems can be asked to suggest what they can do about changing things. Other groups can be asked to suggest their ideas to help.

Written work can be based on the children's discussion.

Guest Speaker: Claire Sams, Associate Lecturer, Open University & teacher-researcher

The Role of the Teacher in Teaching Speaking and Listening

The role of the teacher in developing the quality of children's speaking and listening is crucial. Often children are asked to discuss their ideas or to work together in groups, but it soon becomes clear that many don't know what is really being asked of them. Some are happy to talk, but don't consider other people's views. Others find it hard to join in. But when a teacher makes explicit the kind of talk that is useful the effect on children's ability to talk and think about things together is dramatic. Children who had previously been reluctant to collaborate find a voice; all ideas are carefully considered.

One of the most important things teachers do is to model the kind of speaking and listening we want children to use. This doesn't involve a huge amount of planning or preparation, but a shift in awareness about how we engage in dialogue in all parts of the lesson. Rather than doing the vast majority of talking and expecting children to listen quietly or answer questions individually, teachers can engage children in a more balanced dialogue. We can discuss with the class the kinds of phrases that help everyone to collaborate effectively when working together in groups. This doesn't take long but creates a sense of shared purpose and understanding and helps children to draw on previous learning.

Another important aspect of the teacher's role is the way that we intervene in group talk. This can either be a great opportunity for assessing and furthering effective dialogue, or can stop it in its tracks. One of the most effective examples I came across was when a teacher joined a group discussing various choices. As she listened to the talk, she became aware that one of the children was trying to make a point but others were not responding to her ideas as she wasn't explaining them clearly. First the teacher asked the others to give their opinions. Then she asked the child what she thought and why. Through listening to the group talk, the child was able to explain her point of view and go on to persuade the rest of the group to reconsider.

As a teacher, I found that learning how to enable children to think together created a richer and more interactive learning environment for all. This is an inclusive approach. Children of all abilities are able to contribute effectively to dialogue, once they have been taught how to use exploratory talk. Those who may otherwise find it hard to participate are not only able to do so, but can influence the outcome of a discussion. I have seen a child explain a strategy for solving a problem to other more able children, thus developing the understanding of all the children in the group, because they had been taught how to use speaking and listening effectively by their teacher whilst the 'more able' children had not.

Teaching speaking and listening skills is important to children; they report that they like this approach and recognise its value for learning: 'We normally say *'what do you think?'* instead of leaving someone out ... [I'm not] afraid to challenge someone with their answer - I don't just sit there and say *'alright - pick that one I don't care'*. It makes us feel more confident if we're in a group'.

2.1 Talking Points: Light and Shadow *** illustration 17

Talk together to decide if these are true or false; or are you unsure?

1. We can see shadows every day
2. Shadows are the same shape as the thing they are next to
3. Shadows are biggest in the middle of the day
4. A shadow is made of black dust
5. A shadow can not change its shape
6. Shadows get light darker in the day and lighter in the evening
7. You can get coloured shadows
8. Shadows stick to our feet
9. The sun gives us light every day
10. The moon changes shape because of its own shadow
11. Light can be made from electricity
12. Light can be different colours
13. White light is made up of a mixture of different coloured light

Talk about and do individually, helping each other:

We can draw a light bulb, label all the parts, write what materials all the parts are made from, and say **why** each part is made of that material.

We can draw a rainbow with the colours in the right order

We can draw a person with a big hat, long legs, and a shadow

We can make up two Talking Points about light and shadows

2.2 Talking Points The Peacock Butterfly ***Illustration 18 *** (2 pages)

The peacock butterfly can be seen in summer feeding on thistles, marjoram or buddleia. The peacock butterfly looks almost black when its wings are closed. It is camouflaged to protect it from birds. Its open wings are a rich red with vividly coloured spots which look like eyes, in the same way that the markings on a peacock's tail look like eyes.

If a bird comes too near, the peacock butterfly will open and close its wings rapidly to flash its 'eyes' and startle the bird. Peacock butterflies seen in March have hibernated over winter. The butterflies feed on the sugar (nectar) made by flowers. They cannot grow, or repair their wings if they get damaged.

They mate and lay eggs. Peacock butterflies lay their eggs on the under side of nettle leaves, because nettle leaves are the only thing that their caterpillars can eat. The caterpillars live all together in a web of silk. When they have eaten and grown, they separate and find a leaf where they can hide. Then they form a pupa or chrysalis. Inside the pupa, they change how their body is organised. In summer, the pupa splits, and the butterfly emerges to dry its wings. It flies away to find food and to find others like itself.

In Britain, butterflies are disappearing faster than any other wild creature. One hundred years ago, there were a hundred times as many butterflies as there are now.

Talking Points

1. Nettles are essential to peacock butterflies
2. We need butterflies. They show us how healthy our environment is
3. Other butterflies also use camouflage to protect themselves
4. Butterflies grow bigger as the summer goes on
5. Butterflies and moths can both spin silk - so can spiders
6. We have seen a peacock butterfly, and can name other sorts
7. Butterflies are killed by the cold in winter
8. Butterflies have cold blood and need the sun to warm up
9. We can think of a list of other creatures that hibernate
10. Nettles are dangerous to people so we should cut them all down

Talk about and do individually, helping each other:

We can draw a life- cycle of a peacock butterfly

We can draw a food chain with a butterfly, a blackbird, and a cat

We can draw a butterfly, label all the parts of its body, and say why it is an insect.

Do It Yourself Talking Points

1. Think of the topics or concepts that you are, or will be, teaching. Would there be merit in some exchange of ideas; are there puzzling facts or possible misconceptions which need to be aired and examined?
2. Decide whether you want the children to have a discussion at the start of the session or topic, in the middle, or at the end. Each has advantages – at the start, to take a sounding of current understanding; during group work, to learn from and with one another; at the end, to evaluate learning and share newly conceived thoughts.
3. Find a resource – poem, story, picture, or topic (such as ‘magnetism’ ‘The Vikings’)
4. Use the resource to help you to generate about ten ideas which will get the children talking. It helps to think of the statements as having an answer ‘true, false or unsure’ – that is, as statements which can be rationally considered. Talking Points put the children are put in the position of having to justify their ideas and articulate their thinking. They are not questions.
5. Express your Talking Points simply and concisely.
6. Think of an extension activity: this will involve the group using their ideas to create something or do further work together. This is so that those who rush their discussion (a stage on the way to learning how to think aloud with others) are productively occupied while others talk.
7. Number the list for easy reference in discussion.
8. Prepare the children for their Talking Points session by careful grouping, reminders about talk as work, volume of talk, and the importance of thoughtful contributions.

Children's own Talking Points

Creating questions and answers stimulates higher order thinking – that is, reflection, analysis and evaluation. To generate and phrase a question, a child has to look at or experience something, match this against what they already know or understand, and reflect on where their areas of uncertainty are. It can be hard to think of what it is that you *don't* know and to put it in to words. Working through this process helps children to develop their capacity to question. Once they can create questions using concrete experiences, they can begin to question and reflect on more abstract ideas. Such reflection helps children to consider their own assumptions and to check that they have thought of all relevant information. Through this process, they are learning to reason, to understand the workings of their own mind, and to be accountable to themselves and others. These are attributes that will see them in good stead throughout their lives.

Getting Started

Provide the class with a stimulus which relates to your topic: for example a historical artefact, a model, toy or picture of an animal or plant, a poem, a story, a drawing or cartoon. Ask the children to talk together in their groups to decide on five things that they do know about this; and five they don't know. Ask the group to write five questions which they would like to ask the rest of the class, each on a separate post-it note. These can be genuine questions, or things that the group can already answer.

Now ask the class to reflect on and answer questions from other groups.

This can be organised differently to suit your class:

- a) Ask children to leave their seats and walk around the tables with a partner, reading questions and writing their answers on another post-it. More than one group can add answers to any question, building up a set of information.
- b) Ask groups to swap questions. Alternatively, leave questions where they are and ask groups to swap tables.
- c) Provide one child from each group with a sheet of A4 paper. Ask this child to collect three or four post-its from around the room on their sheet, and return to their group to discuss and make a note of answers.

Next, ask each group to talk about one of their questions and the sorts of answers which their classmates have offered. Ask the class what they have learned, and who has helped them to learn. Bring out points about the ways questions are phrased, the difference between open and closed questions, and the importance of questioning own knowledge to check for understanding and accuracy. Collect up the questions and their answers. Using these as a resource, re-phrase as Talking Points for use in your next session.

Example: Looking at Woodlice * illustration 19**

A class of Year 3 children looked at woodlice in a plastic aquarium and on a brief film on the IWB. These are some of their questions and answers:

What does it eat?	Plants and vegetables
Do they have babies?	Yes you can get little woodlice and eggs
Does it have a shell?	No not like a snail
How many legs does it have?	Fourteen
How fast can it move?	Some faster than others, all pretty slow

These answers were phrased by the teacher as Talking Points and became as a talk-based starter activity for the next session:

Talking Points: The life of Woodlice

With your group think together to decide if these are true, false, or are you unsure?

1. Woodlice are herbivores – they only eat plants
2. Woodlice have babies; they do not lay eggs
3. The woodlice has a hard outside but it is not a shell
4. The woodlouse has more legs than a spider
5. Woodlice move at different speeds

Summary

Talking Points offer a range of statements for reflection and discussion. Children think together about a particular topic, offering a range of points of view, ideas and information. Discussion enables children to find out what others think, know or believe, and to offer their own ideas for exploration in a non-threatening context. After discussion and sharing of ideas, questions arising can be investigated or researched. Sharing ideas through Talking Points means that those who find it hard to articulate their thoughts are helped to see ways to do so as they listen to others. Encouraging responses to tentative ideas increase confidence to take part in classroom talk.

Further Reading

Grugeon, E., Hubbard, L., Smith, C. and Dawes, L. (1998) *Teaching Speaking and Listening in the Primary School*. London: Fulton Press.