



'It's What Makes A Perfect Class': Conversations In The Classroom



Rebecca Rivers graduated from Western Sydney University with a Masters of Teaching (Primary) and began teaching at Lansvale Public School. Whilst studying, Rebecca was introduced to the Fair Go Program student engagement frameworks (MeE) and became interested in applying these principles to her classroom. As an early career teacher, Rebecca was involved in the Fair Go Program's Fair Go from the Get Go and continued this research to complete her Masters of Teaching Honours (First Class) for which she was awarded a Dean's Medal for academic excellence. This article provides a summary of this research.

Introduction

Sitting in the first staff meeting of my second full year of teaching, I tackled my sleepy holiday brain to form three goals for the year ahead. *Communication, Perspective, Enjoyment* - three things I felt were lacking in my class the previous year and that had left a mark of guilt on my memories of an otherwise successful year. After all, as an 'early career', 'new scheme', 'targeted graduate', 'inexperienced' teacher, surely my passion and dedication should not be disintegrating already. Considering that the majority of the bilingual and multilingual students in my current Stage 3 class (in a south-western Sydney 'priority school') received tutoring outside school and were achieving Stage level outcomes, it would have been easy to be content with my teaching and feel comfortable that 29 students would pass through the year without a single head turning. However, it was clear to me that my students were capable of more than just passing tests, and as their teacher I was the number one factor influencing their experience of education (Hayes et al., 2006). Coupled with this was the widespread compliance that was clearly evident inside my classroom walls and which I understood needed to be challenged in order for my students to be substantively engaged and to reach their highest potential (Munns, 2007). This article is a first-hand account of how I responded to that challenge. It documents research exploring the relationship between the nature of classroom discourse and the engagement of learners from a low socio-economic status (SES) background community. As their regular classroom teacher, I implemented pedagogical changes with a focus on student engagement to encourage greater and more in-depth conversations with students about content, pedagogy and assessment.

Researching using *Fair Go* ideas

This project was undertaken as part of the *Fair Go* Program. An action research approach was taken using qualitative methods of data collection and analysis - observations, focus group interviews, student-written reflections, and the researcher's diary. The research utilised a number of themes that explore the relationship between teacher pedagogy and student engagement. First, it took up the *Fair Go* Program's (Fair Go Project Team, 2006; Munns & Sawyer, 2013) definition of 'substantive' student engagement - high cognitive (thinking), high operative (doing) and high affective (feeling). This was a position that could also challenge student compliance. Second, the research focused on the nature of classroom talk as it impacted on the social and academic outcomes of the students. Cazden's work was important here. She recognises that "the task for both teachers and researchers is to make the usually transparent medium of classroom discourse the object of focal attention" (Cazden, 2001: p. 4). Classroom talk was the specific research focus and this focus was located within ideas about student engagement, teacher pedagogy and

Fair Go's notion of the 'insider classroom' (Fair Go Project Team, 2006). The 'insider classroom' concept is from the overall *MeE* Framework (see the article by Geoff Munns in this edition) and focuses on the need for students to play a crucial role in the learning environment. The argument is that when an insider classroom is achieved, the messages being received by students are positive and lead to higher levels of student engagement (Munns & Sawyer, 2013). The aim of this research was to open up opportunities for conversations about learning to be the dominant classroom discourse, in the belief that this would challenge passive classroom compliance and increase student engagement.

The journey

The students who had walked through the classroom door on the first day were quiet, shy and identified 'real' work as sitting in silence, listening to the teacher and doing repetitive rote learning tasks. This classroom was not an 'insider classroom' and the students were not substantively engaged. In front of me sat 29 students whose idea of education, learning and their role as students needed to be challenged using the *MeE Framework*.

First steps: a shared focus on learning

The first step was to prove to the students that their opinion was legitimately valued. The students were asked to describe what they thought a good classroom looked like, sounded like and felt like. We then began to formulate a class philosophy that would act as a benchmark for students' behaviour in class and replace the traditional set of rules. I also realised that my attitudes needed to be challenged. My own teaching philosophy aligned with ideas that 'learning trumps behaviour' (Munns, 2013: p. 47). However, I realised I had not articulated this to the students. Now, I allowed students to sit where they could 'learn best' and to talk to their friends whenever needed 'for learning'. The students started to pick up on these engaging messages and one noted that, 'She cares about our work' (reflective journal entry). The students also started to make choices for themselves, take responsibility for their actions and play a role in the learning environment by no longer relying exclusively on me.

Blogging

I set up an online blog and the results were encouraging. The most withdrawn students in the class immediately became the most active on the blog, and all students began to be more open with each other and myself. They gave feedback on each other's writing and encouraged each other to do their best. The blog gave me the opportunity to pose reflective questions on my own teaching and allowed students to respond openly in a forum that they were comfortable with. I was able to have 'teacher inclusive conversations' and provide students with a voice and control in their learning environment. It provided a back-door entry to encouraging student dialogue and forming an 'insider classroom'.

Drama towards confidence

Using drama also played a major role in developing my students' confidence to speak. Freeze frames, sculpting and questioning-in-role were used on numerous occasions to encourage talk and develop speaking and listening skills (Hertzberg, 2012). Through these activities it was evident that students were:

- affectively engaged, as they smiled and laughed with each other,
- operatively engaged, as they were actively involved, and
- cognitively engaged, as they formulated ideas and discussed how to present them physically.

As one student wrote: "Things that could make me think harder is more freeze frames. Freeze frames make me think harder because they make me imagine and explain things" (student reflective journal). As a response to comments like this, I integrated them into our regular reading cycle.

'Teacher free' lessons

I began to think about how students might become more independent. On the first occasion, in what amounted to a handing over of control, I gave one student a whiteboard marker and set the class on the task of editing a poorly written sentence whilst I stood back and observed. What I saw was breathtaking. There was not a student in the room who was not focused on making the sentence better. The classroom was buzzing, noisy and productive. The lesson went on for twenty minutes before I stepped back in. It was truly amazing to observe the students cognitively, operatively and affectively engage in the task whilst undoubtedly receiving positive messages about their voice, control and ability. It was clear that in order for substantive conversations to take place, I needed to set up tasks with clear purposes that were understood by the students and which required them to talk to each other. The success of this lesson dared me to hand over control more often to the students for sustained periods of time, and so I set them open-ended tasks where they had to look for solutions to problems. It would not be honest of me if I implied that in these sessions the class always ran efficiently or was a perfect picture of quality teaching. However, I have no hesitation in suggesting that every student listened to, engaged in, and participated in, conversations about the content and that they did so much more than would have been likely if I had taken the sole leadership role.

Group projects

Group projects also provided a successful framework for substantive conversations. Students worked in collaborative groups to research, plan and present information and were given choices about the content they investigated, the way they organised their group and how they presented their work. As the teacher, I needed to be continually engaging in 'insider classroom' strategies - substantive conversations with small groups of students, posing questions and problems before leaving them to continue the discussion. The change I observed was shy students, unwilling to participate, who became talkative and passionate learners engaged in tasks. Students' feelings about themselves as learners (and teachers) shone through. Towards the end of the year, one student wrote in response to the question, 'What is the most valuable advice that you can give to students who are involved in group projects?':



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My advice would be to work together, help each other and when someone has an idea you should listen and take their idea ... give suggestions to the group. Don't be shy or scared and let yourself speak clearly, and if someone is shy, help them talk and tell them to share their idea with the group. If you do that from now you will be a good and big part of your group (reflective journal entry).

Shifts in attitude

Over time, I continued to receive feedback from the students about their classroom. The change of focus was evident and students valued stronger outcomes from their education. There was evidence that students could see themselves using new skills for learning in the future: 'The most important thing I learnt this week is to be prepared for something even if you're not up for it' (reflective journal entry). There was also a shift in the view of who was in control and who should dominate talk time. In response to the question, 'How could changes to this week's learning make you think harder?' one student replied, 'To talk more in class than the teacher talking all the time. So we can talk about the ideas in our heads.'

Results - engaging messages

What was learnt? As a result of the students participating in engaging experiences and being a part of an 'insider classroom', at the end of the year the conclusion was that engaging messages had been sent and received. These can be summarised in terms of the *Fair Go* 'message' framework concepts of control, voice, knowledge, ability and place as described below.

Control

The class, over time, demonstrated a highly focused and shared control, with respect to student responsibilities and participation. Students were given chances to think about, discuss and look after their own behaviour. They readily shared and worked in pairs, in groups and as individuals, with the choice of configuration being handed over to the students on numerous occasions. Students expressed their appreciation of being able to work together and make decisions: 'She wants us to cooperate well with other people and wants us to share our ideas in our brains so she knows what we're thinking about' (student interview). In my classroom there was no break in the focus on learning over behaviour. 'It never stops', as one student put it (student interview). It was evident that by my taking a non-dominant stance during classroom discussions, I had communicated messages about control to the students, and in turn, these messages on control had given students more opportunities to talk and become engaged in their learning.

Voice

Within the school context, encouraging students to have a voice was initially a difficult task given some initial tensions between their parents' views and my views on learning. It would be reasonable to conclude that many parents of the students in my class believed learning involved students quietly listening rather than collaborating and talking. Yet, all parents gave permission for their children to participate in the research. As the year progressed, the classroom discourse was characterised as 'a series of conversations

between students, their teacher and each other' (observation notes) through mini-conferences, paired work, small-group work and whole-class discussions. In each of these situations, the students were encouraged to contribute and feel confident about sharing their opinions and ideas. The encouragement of talk in the classroom was indicated by students as being a point of difference between myself and other teachers. Critically important to the engaging message of 'voice', students commented that I listened to their opinions and made changes to classroom processes and tasks in response.

Knowledge

One student articulated in an interview, 'Miss ... doesn't put everything ... straight into one thing; she takes things step by step so we understand it more clearly, and she doesn't just have one lesson on it, she has several on it' (student interview). This statement, along with the observation that knowledge in the classroom was presented as something dynamic, suggests that the students were receiving engaging messages around knowledge. As increased knowledge is closely tied to high cognitive experiences, it is not surprising that the students initially had difficulty speaking about what they had learnt, considering their earlier opinions that hard work was not fun. This highlighted the need for me to make challenging, high cognitive experiences a focus in the classroom, and to encourage students to see the enjoyment they experienced when the work was challenging.

Ability

Through different levels of scaffolding, students of varying academic levels were able to participate in the tasks and feel capable. Higher-order, open-ended questions were used as extension tasks that provided students with an opportunity to explore the content more deeply and initiate new explorations. Through these tasks, students demonstrated knowledge and alternative learning strategies to each other.

Place

The atmosphere and appearance of the classroom became light and vibrant, with students' work, advice and learning goals published on the walls. The students moved around the room comfortably and freely used resources according to their learning needs. Students had a sense of belonging in this classroom. As one student said, 'I feel confident because sometimes your work is on the wall and when visitors come, you're like, "Hey this is my piece of writing on the wall, I wrote that!"' (student interview).

The changes implemented in my classroom throughout the year of this study resulted in an increased level of substantive conversation amongst the students. It would be reasonable to conclude that through the encouragement of a discourse-intensive environment, lessons became cognitively, affectively and operatively more engaging, and students' mere compliance had been challenged.

Conclusion

It is not uncommon for me to have people question my desire to change the processes and practices of my classroom when my students appeared to be working well, sitting quietly and achieving Stage level



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outcomes. However, as discussed throughout this article, my aim was to have students develop an attitude towards lifelong learning, to see themselves as independent, capable thinkers and to engage with their learning on a level that surpasses a focus only on the achievement of grades. My view is that it is only when this occurs that students will achieve their highest potential in social and academic outcomes. As a teacher, I value learning more than behaviour. At the beginning of the year I had 29 students who behaved wonderfully. At the end of the year I had 29 students who considered themselves learners and reflected on the year as being successful due to the experiences we had had together, the knowledge they gained and their ability to achieve learning goals. As one student wrote in a Christmas card to me: 'I'll remember the times we laughed, shared ideas and solved problems together. It's what makes a perfect class.'

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