Ministerial Consultative Council on Curriculum

Oracy, the Forgotten Basic: A Provocation

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Language is primary

Language plays a crucial role in every aspect of our lives... Each day, we use language to develop, maintain and express our sense of identity; establish and maintain relationships with other people; organise our thoughts and learn about the world; obtain information, direction and advice, and inform, direct and advise others; participate in recreational and imaginative activities; appreciate and contribute to our cultural heritages. (P-10 Language Education Framework, 1989)

In the beginning was the Word...

Far more basic than the 'three Rs' (reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic) is oracy — the ability to express oneself fluently in speech. It is questionable whether human beings can make meaning at all without making language. And since humans are social animals, that means making language with each other. Speech governs all our social interactions. We may buy a nuclear reactor with the aid of written submissions and diagrams, but it is talk that clinches the deal. Talk is the commerce of parliament, and makes or breaks governments; talk buys a pair of shoes or obtains a spouse; medical diagnosis is mostly talk. Talk is crucial in flying aeroplanes; making war and love; bringing up children and playing games; in leisure, recreation and entertainment; in praying, celebrating and mourning. Moreover, education, every facet of it, is mostly carried on through talk.

Spoken language — and the non-verbal signals which are part of it, the 'paralanguage' — also define the social situations we are in. Any two people talking are not just exchanging information; they are also signalling and negotiating their class, relative status, degree of familiarity and affection, region of origin and degree of confidence in the situation. This is no simple thing, but it is true at any age. According to the context we are in and our purposes, we weave a web of text and accompanying subtexts. In a school situation, for instance, a teacher or child may be simultaneously negotiating, expressing feelings, attempting to control and to give information — and all listeners will normally understand all those dimensions.
Language and the home environment
The basic competencies are learned at the breast, in the cradle, in the family, and in the community that surrounds the child before and during schooling. Barring disablement, children learn the genres they need for the contexts they encounter in normal life. They come to school with functional oracy.

But . . . for many Australian children, their functional oracy does not travel well beyond their home community. Thousands do not speak English at home, or not often. Thousands more speak dialects which are not easily understood beyond their own hearths, or which give messages that tend to trap their speakers in stereotyped responses. Some — for instance, children brought up in remote communities — only experience limited language contexts (though here television must be a boon, as it brings access to a wide range of contexts, forms, dialects, and genres to the isolated child).

Private and public language
While the language we speak privately is a major way each of us creates and expresses identity and takes part in the communal intercourse of everyday life, an important element of the very fabric of society is the public spoken word. Only think of the main media of social communication — radio, TV and film; the committees, conferences and board meetings which shape nearly all social institutions; government itself, at all levels; the announcements, promotions and advertisements whereby we find direction, especially in cities; the formal rites of our social lives such as weddings, religious ceremonies and farewells. All these occasions focus on special and particular genres of the public spoken word. The shop assistant, the business manager, the bride and the best man, the NCO, the auctioneer, the sporting referee and the team coach, the factory chargehand, the scout leader, the victim of injustice and the ice-rink attendant all need command of public language. In a courtroom the judge and lawyers depend on high level command of it for success, but the defendant needs it more desperately for survival — and how many defendants have sunk or been sunk through their tied tongues? Confidence and articulateness in public are acquired, not inherited, and the home context of most children provides scant opportunity to acquire them — after all, the home is the realm of the private.
1. 'Language is primary. We make meaning from our personal experience by autobiographical narrative, with its accompanying discourse and reflection.' (Halliday, M. A. K. 1986)

2. ibid.

3. For a revealing glimpse of how public and private language are shaped in our society, see Sennett, R. (1976).
LANGUAGE, POWER AND THE SCHOOL

The challenge
There's a double challenge in this for schools:
1. the natural language development of each individual must be recognised and encouraged;
2. advanced oracy comes with practice and confidence in a wide variety of genres, public as well as private.

The history
Ben Jonson (c 1605) said: 'Language best showeth a man — speak that I may see thee.' And that goes for woman too, and people collectively. Now Jonson was writing at the end of an age whose intellectual and political leaders cherished spoken language and were intoxicated by its possibilities. However, his enemies and successors were those Puritans who feared the power of the spoken word, closed his theatres and censored the new knowledge. Their successors were the Gradgrinds\(^1\) of the nineteenth century who infected the new compulsory schools with meretricious moralising and crushing authoritarianism.

'Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts . . . Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them . . . Stick to Facts, Sir!' The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a school-room . . . The emphasis was helped by the speaker's voice, which was inflexible, dry, and dictatorial . . . The speaker's obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders — nay his very neckcloth, trained to take him by the throat with an unaccommodating grasp, like a stubborn fact, as it was, all helped the emphasis.

'In this life we want nothing but Facts, Sir — nothing but Facts!'

Over a century later, our ideas at least have changed — what modern teacher more concerned for the children than for personal power could look Jonson in the eye and seriously assert that 'a good classroom is a quiet classroom', that 'silence
is golden', and that 'children should be seen and not heard'? Knowledge and education for all are interactive and always have been, as any Aboriginal elder could always have told us. Talk leads to knowledge, and knowledge is power. Those dreadful Victorian slogans distorted education to make conformity the aim of the school, and knowledge the province of the powerful, the possession of the teacher and those who control the schools.  

School language, teacher's language, children's language  
However, even for the caring and interactive teacher, school inevitably provides a very narrow range of contexts, with the children spending most of their days with the same groups of people, from familiar social classes and in familiar status patterns, doing much the same range of tasks every day. Far from encouraging language development, this restrictiveness can actively inhibit it. Add to that some common practices in schools, hangovers from the nineteenth century: the pursuit of a quiet class; of silent, individual work; of privileging writing over talking; the very fact that reading and writing are commonly called 'basics' and speaking and listening are not. These all compound the potential disablement of this vital capacity.  

Another disabling factor may be the very language which children hear from their teachers. Most teachers are middle-class, urban and anglo-saxon, which is manifested in our speech, and thus in the dominant language forms within the school. This may well be quite different from the dialect, accent, intonation patterns and vocabulary of our students, which can cause both misunderstanding and worse. Some teachers believe that they speak a correct form of English — 'Queen's English', or 'received pronunciation' — and are careful to model it to their students. This form consists of an accent constructed closely to parallel the middle-class accent of urban southern England, whence it derives. It is characterised by a rather wider vocabulary of words and a much narrower one of intonations than, say, an English-speaking Aborigine, and quite different features of accent, timing and enunciation. In terms of functional construction of meaning, it is not better English, though it does travel quite well.
Far from liberating the students, this kind of teacher-talk can and does have the effect of devaluing the children's own language, and taking away their confidence as speakers. Recent studies show that children come to school with a positive self-image as talkers (Scott, 1991). Parents and family do not as a rule inhibit their children's language; it is natural to be proud of each step. To use Bruner's word (1978), a normal mother instinctively 'scaffolds' her child's understanding through language, by taking the child's ideas seriously, thinking through what the child is trying to communicate, allowing the child to move ahead when capable of doing so, and supporting the child only when he or she seems to need help. Parents and family, it seems, do their job, untrained. Then we take over, the trained communicators, and by as young as 7 or 8, children see their talk as bad or wrong, the province of the chatterbox, or at best trivial:

'[we don't talk] when we do maths and English because it's important.'

[Even at eight years old, children believe:]
• talking stops you working
• talking is not work
• if you are allowed to talk the work is not important
• teachers let you talk as long as you do it quietly.

The logic is all too clear; children work out for themselves the low status of talk as a means of learning. (Scott, 1991)

What are the implications of this for their capacity to talk in later life?

When schooling is replaced by tertiary education, it is assumed that not only do students have little need to practise oracy and the skills of social communication, but that these constitute a lower form of educational transaction. A phrase much mooted in higher education is 'education for autonomy', which is defined, if at all, individualistically. In practice it implies students receiving a progressively larger proportion of lectures (backed up by library study) than of interactive classes. In a not untypical Queensland university there is a new (1990) compulsory ten-hours-a-week introductory course in communication for prospective teachers. This consists of a one-hour lecture to 400 students in a lecture hall — with an overspill video next door — seven hours of associated reading and writing, and a
mere two hours of seminars with over twenty students in each (that is, the opportunity for five minutes public speaking for each student, or perhaps ten minutes of more private discourse) in which the centre of attention is what is being talked about — not the talking itself or its efficacy. It is the only designated communication tuition which these students, preparing to be public communicators, receive in their pre-service program. At the same university this year, a lecturer in language and literature, of all things, silenced an enthusiastically enquiring first-year student with the line, 'You're not here to ask questions, you're here to listen to me and learn'.

Countering the myths
Those once unassailable injunctions so carefully put in place by Mr Gradgrind are unfortunately very hard to remove from the fabric of the schools, or from our own assumptions, try as we do today. For instance:

- Our schools still consist of one adult teacher for every thirty or so schoolchildren. *(I wonder whether they must, all the time?)*
- The adult's job, after all, is to impart information. *(I wonder if that's really all, or even most, of the job?)*
- Moreover, we barely have enough time to teach them to be literate and numerate, as well as all the other subjects in the curriculum, and we can't spare time out to let them talk. *(I wonder whether time spent is necessarily the same as time out?)*
- It is not our fault that the classroom is a limited environment, with thirty youngsters of the same age crammed into a small cluttered space. *(I wonder if you already know of ways we can transcend the spatial limitations?)*
- We can't give the children direct experience of those myriad contexts from weddings to shoe shops, from parliament to policemen. *(I wonder if we could pretend?)*
- We need to talk a lot, to give the children an idea of correct English. *(I wonder if our dialect really is more functional than the children's?)*

Spoken language in learning
How do you and I learn best? Is it by lumps of objective data fed to us silently at arbitrary times by somebody who has not found out whether we have any purpose
or will to consume them at those times? Or is it finding patterns that count, and finding the need to acquire data and skills? Is useful knowledge static and unchallengeable, or is it dynamic, negotiable, dependent on our purposes? For instance, when we are strangers in a strange town, or novices in a new situation, what role does enquiry play for us? Do we like to do our learning by ourselves or discuss it with other learners as we go along? Do we prefer being told what to think or being given problems and puzzles to solve? Do we prefer to be told everything or to engage in trial and error? Do we want data fed to us in a hurry and in silence, where we cannot ask questions at the moment we want to, with the threat of penalty for failure to learn? Alternatively, do we want to be helped to engage in this new situation; to stop and seek clarification or backtrack when we need it, to pursue the knowledge which is most useful for our purposes; to be free to make a tentative start, to have a go ourselves when we feel ready; to be given confidence that if we make a mistake it won't be a disaster; that there is someone to turn to for help, or to discuss and reflect on what we have achieved and where we went wrong? (By the way, one thing to remember if you have taken these questions personally — we are adults, relatively free agents, who can choose our learning times and purposes: schoolchildren are a captive audience.)

Written knowledge and spoken knowledge
This paper is full of questions. None of them is rhetorical. As teachers we have to address them all before and while we teach. Even if we ignore them, we address them by default, in our practice. Some of them appear to imply right answers — and they do, because the MCCC has an ideological perspective which permitted it to commission me to write this monograph, and I have my own beliefs. And you can't argue with my 'right' answers — though you may want to and, at the least, quite justifiably feel that there is a lot more to be said than I have suggested. Therein lie three traps:

- the spurious authority of the written word (just because it lasts longer, it doesn't mean it's more valuable or truer than the spoken word);
- the assumption that there is something called objective knowledge existing apart from our contextual understanding (is there such a thing as a concept without somebody to conceive it, somewhere, sometime?);
• the non-negotiability of the teacher-monologue model of education (which, incidentally, includes this monograph).

Take my cavalier reference to history on pages 4-5: if you don’t know much about the 17th or 19th centuries you have little choice but to accept it whole; if you do know about either the Puritans or the start of compulsory education, you may well reject it out of hand as crude and simplistic. What you can't do in either case is to discuss with me my specific meanings and my credentials, nor bring your own knowledge and intelligence to bear for us to explore together the extent and degree of its validity in the oracy debate.

Questions
Look again at the questions in italics on page 7. Beginning with the wonderful words 'I wonder' (arguably the richest opening gambit in the teacher's repertoire, and one of the least used), they do not predicate a right answer, but imply many possibilities. By wondering, the teacher lets in the learner — in this case, you — with your own answers, giving you the right and the power to try out, to assert. A diet of questions to which the teacher already knows the answers can only close out the children from the knowledge they already possess, even of apparently 'new' topics.

For instance, I remember starting a lesson with the question: 'What's the most important thing about the Industrial Revolution?'. Getting a predictable glum silence, I told the students about it, with written notes and much use of the blackboard. They never became interested. Taking the same subject again with another class, I phrased the question differently: 'You've probably never heard the phrase 'Industrial Revolution' but some of you may recognise the words — I wonder if we can work out what it means?'. Within three minutes they had defined it as a period in history of great and violent change, when machines were invented to take over the earlier technology of hand crafting, when factories pulled people from the land and their handlooms, when James Watt developed the steam engine and Benjamin Franklin invented the lightning conductor; an unhappy period for most, when labourers worked long hours in factories, and children went to work in the mills and mines, and rich mine-owners became richer, but lots of
people lost their jobs and some emigrated to Australia. I provided nothing of this information, and, though I occasionally intervened to focus the discussion, I did not reject any of the fallacies which were ventured, such as the invention of electric light, which was explored and then rejected by the group. The children did nearly all the talking, and were keen to continue the lesson (both by library research and in drama) to test out their perceptions, and they fell with relish on both the documents and the role-play which I offered them next.

1. Thomas Gradgrind is the schoolteacher in Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times*, a savage portrait of a Victorian utilitarian, or economic rationalist, as he would now be called.

2. The wide canon of work which deals with the politics of schooling includes all the books of the 'de-schooling society' movement of the 1970s (Ivan Illich, Everett Reimer, John Holt et al.) including two books, one at the beginning of the period, one at the end, which specifically address the language aspects: Postman et al. (1971) *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, and Kress & Hodge (1979) *Language as Ideology*.

3. Among the substantial scholarship which proves what is self-evident to an observer of the same children in and out of school are two books by G. Little (1973), *Language Analysis Handbook* and *Language and Curriculum*.

TALK IN THE CLASSROOM

Here are two examples of classroom interaction involving students and a teacher. Even without seeing all the paralanguage, they indicate a quite different approach both to learning and to talking.

• Which corresponds most closely to your practice?
• Are you sure?
• Which is better? (Yes there is a right answer to this question, one I hope you'll share with me.)

Social Studies, Year 6: The Mining Company¹

T: (sarcasm) Isn't that amusing! So we need a town, and what's a town, Lyn?
P: People living together, roads, houses and shops.
T: OK, so the Company has to build a town for the people to live in. But if your parents were to go there what would they need? Sit down Neil!
P: A car.
T: Yes.
P: Shops.
T: Yes.
P: Water supply.
T: Yes. What else would be needed, Mara? Stand up those who are talking while Mara is talking. What do you have to say that's so important to be rude, Chris?
P: (giggles) I just said he's cute.
T: Carry on Mara.
P: Place to live, place to shop.
T: Are there any other things . . . I've spoken to you twice Chris! Is there anything else?
P: Power.
T: Right.
P: Schools.
T: Yes.
P: Transport.
T: Yes. What do you think would be the main transport?
P: Railway.
T: Yes. Hands up who thinks rail would be the major form.
P: Planes?
T: Hands up who thinks planes . . . yes, so we need an airport too.
Do you have other needs than a place to live, things to eat?
P: Schools.
T: Yes.
P: Toilets.
T: Yes.
P: Medical services.
T: Right. And ambulances and others . . .
P: People to prepare food . . .
T: Right. But there's one very essential need no-one's mentioned.
P: Clothes.
T: No. Another one.
P: Petrol pumps and things.
T: No. It starts with 'R', the one I'm thinking of. Edward?
P: Rivers. (Audible sigh from class).

Social Studies, Year 2: Our School
(The teacher is pretending to be a dinosaur, lost in the school grounds, whom the children have saved, and they are explaining what the location is.)
Ps: (reading) We all go to Capalaba State School. It's a big school.
T: (as Dino) Do all little children have to come to school?
Some Ps: Yes.
Some Ps: No.
P: When they get bigger, but not when they are two and five and six.
And Mr Dino, some . . . not when we're babies, not when we're smaller than this — we have to grow up to big children.
Ps (reading): At school we have a playground, a library, a swimming pool, a
dental clinic . . .
T: I don't understand — what's a playground?
P: It's a sort of park with swings in it and we play.
P: Remember, when you first met us, you got frightened and you ran out there. That was the playground.

T: Is it a good place or a bad place?

P: A good place.

T: What's a library?

P: It's where all books are — this is a book, with pictures and writing. It's over there, that way.

P: And there's dinosaur books, about — like — you!

T: What's a swimming pool?

P: It's like you lay in it and it's got water in and there's a teacher — we've got a man teacher — and the teachers tell us how to swim. You'll find out who the teacher is. Tomorrow you'll find out. We have swimming tomorrow.

T: Now, what's a dental . . . thing?

P: It's where you go to the dentist and have your teeth fixed.

P: These are teeth.

P: They make sure your teeth are clean and that.

P: They pull them out if they are bad . . . and fillings, you get fillings. But I haven't got any.

T: Is it good to have fillings, or bad to have fillings?

P: Bad!

P: It's good! If you've got holes in your teeth, that is.

T: Where do they come from?

P: The dentist.

T: Holes come from the dentist?

P: No! They come from bacteria in your teeth. If you eat too much sweet things, and you don't clean your teeth properly you get holes in your teeth.

P: That's probably what happened to dinosaurs. They got holes in their teeth and died out.

T: When did dinosaurs die out? Before people or after people?

P: Before, when there's no people.

P: Millions of years.

P: And now there's just little tiny bones.
P: No, BIG bones!
P: Fossils.
P: Hundreds and hundreds of years ago.
T: Would dinosaurs have had big swimming pools and schools?
P: No, they just had swamps.
P: Would you like to come with us to the museum next week and see some dinosaur bones?
T: I'm not sure.

These two lessons are attempting to do much the same thing — share extant knowledge to address a situation for new learning in social studies. It does not take a detailed grammatical and syntactic analysis to see the poverty of both language and thought in the first lesson, compared with the second, where the children were four years younger. Not only that, the remorseless sequence of teacher/pupil/teacher/pupil in the first lesson gives each student very little opportunity to give even those stunted and monosyllabic replies.

Technology, Year 7: Making a Rubber Stamp

This third example features two students with no teacher present. In the first part they have been asked to reflect on their term's project.

G: On my one, I was cutting this base out and, em, I was using a saw . . . you know a tenon saw instead of a coping saw, because Miss was telling the people using this round stuff to cut it with a tenon saw, so I was using the tenon saw to cut out my handle . . . and I should have been using the coping saw.
P: Think you done well?
G: Yeah, mark out of 10, I think I got 8. What do you reckon you'd give yourself out of 10?
P: I'd say about 7 1/2.
G: Why's that?
P: Well, I feel I did this, like I was getting the right idea, but the rubber stamps on the bottom could've been a bit better . . . it could've been that my model should have been more simple . . .
but my one was a bit complicated because it was more letters instead of just one.

G: My handle — is all right, actually. I was drilling a hole in the handle so I could get a little piece of wood through, to keep it in place in the middle and, em, KM moved it, so it drilled an offset hole . . . and that's why it's got that gap there.

P: If you was to do it again, what do you think should change on it?

G: Em . . . I'd change definitely the rubber on the bottom and maybe the handle. What about you?

P: Well, if I was to do it again, I'd make the handle the same shape, but make it with, er, slightly smoother edges and I'd redesign the bottom rubber, really.

G: Yeah, my handle it's . . . I'd do the same as you, change my handle. When you look at it, you look at the drawing that's on it (design plan) and it's completely different to what it's now — you see, on there? I mean, you're supposed to have this, where you put your two fingers but it isn't, it's flat. Mind you it still works, you still get a really good grip on it when you're pushing down so . . . I'm quite pleased with it.

Later, presenting an account of their work to another pupil pair:

G: The way we made our rubber stamp was to get several pieces of wood and cut them into a 16 x 14 mm oblong.

P: Then we had to make our handle. But before we done that, we had to sand down our 16 x 14 rectangle on the sander. The sander was quite dangerous so we had to use goggles.

G: Then we made our handle, we had to cut it. I cut mine about 4 cm long and sanded down the ends so they were smooth and then I got the drill and lines levelled it all up and drilled a hole straight through the middle.

P: Then, on the side of the handle, we stuck a file, and filed it down to make finger holes, one on each side.
Then we got a . . . round piece . . . measured out a round piece of wood, found the middle, and drilled a hole straight through the middle of that.

Then straight through all the holes, we stuck them all together, with a piece of dowelling going all the way through. And then we glued it.

These students are confidently and articulately describing actions and shapes of considerable complexity, with an easy use of the appropriate technical language. In their private discussion they listen to each other, question and support with relaxed, colloquial speech; in the more public setting, their language becomes more fluently formal and precise.

1. This example was recorded by Dr J. Carroll, Mitchell CAE, Bathurst, and used in his unpublished PhD thesis Drama and Language, University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

2. This example was taught by Brad Haseman, Drama Consultant, Brisbane South Region (1981). It is recorded in Drama in Education, Journal of the National Association for Drama in Education, vol. 6, no. 2.

**THE TALKING CLASSROOM**

The role of the teacher

These three examples could seem to imply that the more the teacher is present, the less oracy the children exhibit! Certainly the first extract demonstrates how the naturally developing articulateness of children can be seriously inhibited by intrusive and domineering teacher-talk. On the other hand, the eager informativeness and imaginativeness of Dino's helpers is stimulated and kept focused by the teacher's deft and restrained interventions. This is true too of the last extract: the unseen hand of the teacher has structured the reflective tasks with clarity and purpose in the students' eyes, and given them in their previous learning familiarity of access to the technological jargon. The teacher is merely less in the limelight.

This restrained presence is crucial to the subject matter of the lesson — as Vygotsky (1962) puts it: 'With assistance every child can do more than he can by himself . . . what the child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow; therefore . . . instruction . . . must be aimed not so much at the ripe as the ripening functions'. Halliday (1982) applies this to the classroom: the teacher can 'share in the language-creating process . . . helping the children find new ways to say or write things as they find new reasons to express themselves or to understand'. What a travesty of that the first transcripted lesson provides, with the children's language reduced to playing 'guess what's in teacher's mind', where the teacher hogs the interaction so that the children can interpolate language at best at an average rate of 1:60, and unattached nouns are the order of the day.

Another inestimable advantage for the caring teacher of not being in the spotlight is that she or he can more effectively 'kidwatch' — learn about the children and how they learn through scrutinising their language use, their conceptualising, their social development and their language itself (Goodman, 1991).

Goodman gives the example of a kindergarten teacher who spoke to her class about what was wrong with wasting milk prior to morning snack time. Tomasa was observed taking a small sip of milk. She then carefully closed the milk carton, wiped her face with her paper towel, and slowly placed the carton of milk
in the waste basket, holding it tight until it reached the bottom.
'Didn't we just talk about not wasting milk?', Miss Dasson asked.
'I ain't waste my milk', Tomasa responded. 'I keeped everything real clean!' Miss Dasson now knows that 'waste' has an alternative meaning in the language of Tomasa's community — that is, 'to spill'. She and Tomasa can now better share each other's meanings.

Children's spoken language can even be used for formal assessment. The third extract, from the technology lesson, was transcribed as part of the summative assessment of those students for their end-of-year result. On the other hand, silence reveals nothing, and, as another poor listener and slow learner, King Lear, says: 'Nothing shall come of nothing'.

The listening teacher
Now a few questions which you know the answer to, and I don't.
- Do you 'kidwatch'?
- What kind of talk happens in your classroom?
- Are you sure, or do you just think so?
- Have you ever verified it?
- What kind of talk would you like to see more of?
- What constraints are stopping you?
- Are there any ways round those constraints?
- Do you find questions to ask to which you genuinely want to know the answer for yourself? (Children like to be helpful!)
- How much of your language is the language of control and status? (One of the differences between extracts 1 and 2 is that when the teacher gives the children higher status and assumes they will use it constructively, they do.)
- Do you provide a good language model for the children?
- Whether yes or no to the above, what criteria of 'good' are you using?
- Have you ever tried analysing yourself and your classroom before in this way?!
Dismantling the myths
Parents have a deep interest in their children’s language development. Nowadays more and more administrators and principals are endorsing the notion of active, interactive classrooms. Teachers, too, are answering positively for themselves as listeners, overcoming their constraints with ingenuity and dedication.

Quite frequently, the last to be persuaded are the students themselves, especially those who have been accustomed to language-inhibiting modes of education — those eight-year-olds, for instance, who think that maths is too important for talk. Children from a very early age, as we have seen, identify the real (what used, unaccountably, to be called the 'hidden') curriculum, and master the acceptable rules. They develop particular and very clear expectations. Whether impelled by respect and affection for their teacher, natural adeptness at the subjects or fear of consequences, implicitly they sign contracts which bind them to specific behaviour in return for promised success. A significant part of the process of schooling is conniving with their teachers to undergo the expected.

Many students, particularly in the secondary years, are used to working in a school, or in some of their classes, where their models include respect for silence, for the teacher’s superior command of a 'correct' language usage, and for the teacher to use most of the language. They have learned that individually and collectively they have little to offer in the ongoing business of the classroom, other than accepting what is given. These expectations take time and patience to dismantle. Many well-meaning teachers, confronted with a language-restrictive school or class, have made a start at inviting their students to share more in the language, only to have the children read their efforts as lèse-majesté — the teacher losing or relinquishing control of the class — and use their new-found freedom to make mischief.

Structures for change
However, as many schools have found in Queensland and overseas, students' expectations can be changed; the contracts renegotiated. Those technology students earnestly discussing their artefacts were used to structures which allowed them to talk, and tasks which demanded it. Here are some examples of such structures (all
taken from the middle years of schooling, though useable with any age range) — which should be recognisable to many teachers, though they may use different terminology:

Brainstorming:
Members of a Year 8 class were told they were going to be consultants to a climbing equipment company, specialising in climbing ropes. As a class they brainstormed everything they could think of relating to safety in the manufacture of climbing ropes. Once ideas were pooled, a decision was made that a key factor was load-bearing. Pairs went off to plan an investigation to test load-bearing capacities of different materials and their behaviour under stress.

Jigsaw:
A Year 9 history class was working on maps of the local town. Five maps were used, each from a different period of history. Home groups of five divided the maps up, and then expert groups formed, with a check list of questions to help them 'interrogate' their map. When home groups re-formed, each student was required to introduce his or her map and talk through the information gleaned from it. Each group was then asked to summarise what it had learned about how the town had developed over a 200-year period, and to start speculating about the reasons for this.

Twos to fours:
A Year 7 science class was asked to brainstorm, in pairs, all of their ideas about the term 'force'. Pairs then met up and formed fours, and having compared lists, then categorised their ideas into different kinds of forces.

Rainbow groups:
Members of the same science class were then each given a number, 1–4. New 'rainbow' groupings, all with the same number, were
formed, and pupils were asked to introduce and explain their force categories to each other. Each new group was then asked to devise some scientific questions in preparation for a class discussion.

Envoys:
A Year 7 history class was divided into small groups. Each group was given a different historical artefact to handle and speculate about. Once some ideas about origin, age and use had been generated, one group member went to the next group to introduce the artefact and explain the group's thinking. The new group then contributed ideas before the envoy returned to the original group.

Listening triads:
Students in a Year 9 English class each selected sections from a poem that they felt were interesting or significant or both. They formed groups of three — speaker, questioner and recorder. Each group member read out her or his chosen section, and discussed with the questioner reasons for the choice. At the end, after all three had introduced their chosen sections and taken a turn as questioner and recorder, the recorder's notes were considered and the group began to draft a collaborative written response to the whole poem.

Critical friends:
A Year 7 class, in groups, composed a short poem out of a list of single words. One pupil in each group remained outside the activity as an observer, referring to a previously agreed check list on group cooperation. Once the task was completed, each pupil wrote a short evaluation of her or his own contribution to the group. These were then compared with the observer's evaluation.

(‘2: Way of Working, 1991’)

While it is certainly true that talk does take time, as teachers are discovering by boldly using these varied talk structures and many others, time spent now is time saved later — children who are encouraged to engage actively with their learning
learn faster and more retentively in the long run.

Nor need the classroom be a restrictive environment, offering a limited range of learning contexts and relationships. Several of the above strategies imply a role for learners which puts them in a very untraditional relationship to their learning — not supplicants, but experts. These strategies build on the knowledge and skills learners already have, helping them to fill the 'mantle of the expert' provided by the teaching context. A child can take the perspective and enough of the language and procedures of a police officer, a nurse, a scientist, an historian, an investigative reporter or whomever and bring this to bear in solving a problem or discussing an issue.

This already takes a big step towards reincorporating the world of make-believe, often banished from the traditional school classroom either as too trivial or too hard. From a child's second year of life, invoking dramatic play is a crucial part of the mechanism of making sense of its world, of both exploring and ordering experience, by creating what Susan Langer (1953) calls 'virtual' realities, and by doing this socially, using interaction and the spoken word. There is a mountain of scholarship which reveals that dramatic play is a key human learning tool. The world outside the school acknowledges this — the army keeps in readiness for combat, the police and fire services for domestic crises, by playing make-believe as realistically as possible; big business plans its corporate strategies by simulation and trains its executives by role-play. Some schools, on the other hand, still distinguish between 'work' and 'play', and believe the latter is best left outside in the playground. Bring it into the classroom, of course, and anything is possible. By agreement, the classroom and its inhabitants can become anywhere and anyone; contexts from beyond the classroom and beyond the children's experience can be set up and lived through, with whatever constraints, dilemmas, problems the teacher wishes to set. Children can practise the language of judges, rebels, parents, priests and rulers, forest rangers and property developers, the powerful and the powerless, share their dilemmas and make their decisions, without risk in the real world.

This takes care. The contract has to be negotiated, the students' expectations
prepared, and the structures set up as meticulously as any lecture notes. Teachers
do need to be masters of their own language and signals, and have some skill in
setting up effective contexts for exploration. In particular, the boundaries between
the public and the private need to be clear — when to share in private exploration,
and when to present or perform.

1. Useful guidance for teachers on how to go about observing and analysing both
their own classroom practice and the children's language are provided in materials
from the UK National Oracy Project, particularly: '2: Ways of Working', and
Swann, J. 1991, 'Observing, Recording and Analysing Classroom Talk'.

2. Among those who would disagree with these children is Tom Brissenden, see
Talking About Mathematics (1989), and Mathematical Discussion in Primary
Classrooms (1989).

3. The phrase 'mantle of the expert' was coined, and numerous strategies for
privileging children's talk developed, by the UK drama educator Dorothy
Heathcote, see O'Neill (1985), The Collected Writings of Dorothy Heathcote.

4. See the essays by Bruner, Vygotsky, Bateman, Geertz etc. in Bruner et al. Play: A
Reader; Freud, Piaget and Jung also wrote extensively about its use; more
specifically, the drama in education movement has examined the characteristics of
dramatic play both for their own sake and in classroom implementation — e.g.
CONCLUSION

Halliday's assertion that 'language is primary' is true in so many ways, inside and beyond the school. Rosen (1985) points out that we create our very identity by narrating our personal experience, and a great part of our social discourse consists of sharing our personal narratives. Through talk we name and distance our experience, allowing us to reflect on it and transform it for use. Through talk we give others access to it, and gain access to theirs. Through talk we negotiate meaning. Through talk we gain power over our lives.

When students have power and control over the language they use, and can recognise how others are using and abusing language, they have one of the most crucial tools towards controlling their own lives and decisions. The ability to manage and not be managed by language is, we believe, one way to overcome the inequities of society. (Haseman & O'Toole, 1990)

Even within the school, as Harste (1991) follows countless scholars and observers in emphasising, conversation is a basic activity of learning, one of the conditions for enquiry. The very notion of enquiry assumes both a respondent — you can't enquire from nobody — and a discourse, the making and testing of theory. In the words of Harste again:

Knowledge is not 'out there' [or in teachers' heads, or in their books] waiting to be discovered, but socially, historically and culturally constructed, and thus dynamic . . . New meaning resides in the gap between theory and practice, and learning is finding patterns that count.

In exploring and mapping any territory, members of an expedition must keep in constant touch, sharing their findings and using their intelligence to solve problems, find meaningful patterns and negotiate new directions. In schools, the teacher is the leader of that expedition, on a cooperative venture with the students as co-expeditionaries. They are not the inanimate bags and bottle for specimens.
They are certainly not the mute mules to be loaded.

The main purpose of language education in schools is to continue the development of children's language as a central resource in their lives. By developing the children's capacity to speak, listen, write and read, language education in the P–10 years ensures that they can use language effectively wherever it is needed. (*P–10 Language Education Framework, 1989*)

Does it?
EPILOGUE

What now? For whom?

If, after reading this document, you have the interest or fortitude to tackle an epilogue, it probably means that you have been provoked rather than offended, and your views correspond, at least roughly, with what lies behind the questions.

If so, you probably want to get your own back with a question of your own, something like:

OK what now — where to from here?

Perhaps even:

I'd like to, but what can I do?

Such tenacity deserves a proper answer. That, however, depends on who you are. I don't have all the answers for all readers, but I shall address the above questions, with due attention to the usual educational hierarchy (so if you are a very big wheel, you might choose to skip the first bits).

If you are a student

(Whether at school or at a tertiary institution, this monograph might have fallen into your hands, and you could perhaps be consulted in discussions on this subject.)

Remember, you are the client. It may sometimes seem to you as if you are the mute subject or even victim of other people's strategies, other people's ideas and structures. This is not so, and you are not. You are the whole reason the educational business exists. You have a natural right to be consulted, to be treated like a rational human being. You have a responsibility to respond as one. Talk is the first and most natural medium for this, in itself. If you are not being consulted, or if your classroom is a silent affair, or only has one-way communication (they talk, you listen), then perhaps you need to assert yourself. You probably know better than I do the ways in which your educational masters can be made to listen. However, here are a couple of tips:
Try first a rational approach. Usually, your teachers are just trying to do their best and have pressures on them — like syllabuses which they must follow. Under these pressures, they may well not be aware that they are gagging you, and inhibiting your oracy (they probably haven't read this monograph yet). You could do worse, if you respect and trust your teachers, to invite them to read it. Then, firstly, ask politely to be included in the lesson structures. You may take a pro-active role in developing a new contract that says: 'we won't abuse the airwaves or your class control if you give us clear tasks which allow us to learn by talking together. Perhaps we can negotiate some tasks for us which use your expertise as teachers and harness the knowledge and talking skills we students already have and want to use.'

Some of you will be groaning by this time, aware that the power and status relationships within your classroom, or the lack of close relationships with your teachers, will make such an approach impossible. This is particularly true in secondary schools where you may not know your subject teacher well. The usual way to deal with this is to resort to misbehaving, either by yourself or with a group of friends. While some clever teachers may understand your reaction and respond to it, this has been known to drive the teacher into more repressive actions. After all, if your way of asserting yourselves is destroying the lesson, isn't it logical to try to stop you asserting yourselves? The answer here is the way of the oppressed through the ages: act together. If you can get yourselves in sufficient agreement to make a joint appeal to your teacher or the system, it is more likely to be noticed and acted upon. Because teaching and learning depend so much on personality, and on power, it is very easy for teachers to feel they need to have a grip on the class, which can be easily lost. If you can phrase your appeal in a positive way, so that the teacher feels good about the approach, and not personally threatened, you will have scored a major (and quite rare) victory for sanity, and for the oracy of your whole class.

This may seem like hopelessly impractical idealism, expecting goodwill where none exists on either side. If so, our education system must be in a bad way.
If you are a parent

There are lots of things you can do. Probably one of the first steps is to try to remove from your own mind the models of your schooling which left you thinking that silence = order = learning. A good start is to remember the teachers (if any) who inspired you, whose lessons you remember with excitement and affection — and canvass your friends for their recollections. The chances are that many of those memories will be of teachers who were themselves very articulate, who could weave a spell through their words, and those who found tasks which allowed you rein for your imagination and skills.

Having done that, encourage those aspects of your child's schooling which demand talk. Talk with your children about the schoolwork that interests them; listen to them with interest; share with them what interests you; read with them. These activities need not be confined to the small child, either — the adolescent needs to talk just as much as the tot, and my own children have loved shared reading till well into adulthood.

You can have an important influence on the ethos of your children's school, and on how easily principals and teachers can put into practice sociable learning structures — that is, talking schools. Get vocal yourselves. Educators in the service of those spurious tyrants 'the basics' (those others, remember?) are very used to presenting themselves as the responsible ones — sanctimoniously demanding more time for silent and individualised accumulation of literacy and numeracy — as if anybody presenting an alternative view is a reckless squanderer of childhood's potential. It may help your confidence to know that many studies have proved that in schools where interactive teaching methods and subjects (particularly the creative and performing arts) are regularly experienced, the literacy and numeracy of the students improve *measurably*¹. We don't hear too much about those studies. Ask about them at your P&C Association, and find out at parent-teacher meetings how much time your child's teachers give to spoken English, drama and sociable learning projects in any subject area. If your child says that a history or science teacher teaches primarily through lectures, notes and faded overhead transparencies, find out why your money is being wasted on such travesties. You can buy your child a book or computer program which does the
same thing, more interestingly, more accurately and more up-to-date, for a squillionth the cost of such pedants with their expensive tertiary training.

If you are a teacher
(And in the term 'teacher' I include all those of us who work in the tertiary sector, either as teachers of subjects like thermodynamics and contemporary dance, or as researchers into education and teachers of teachers.)

As a conscientious teacher not devoid of imagination, you will probably already be conscious of what you are doing to address the problems raised in this paper, and see further ways in which you can improve your practice.

For instance, you might start by looking at the references listed at the end of this monograph, and getting stuck into some of the very helpful texts indicated — for example, Tom Brissenden's splendidly simple approach to oracy in maths (1988) is an object lesson to all teachers of the so-called 'hard' or 'scientific' subjects. The work of the United Kingdom Oracy Project (Scott, 1991) provides many inspiring examples of teaching styles and structures too. The project was managed from the grassroots, so it is full of real practice, not pious exhortations. More important, this major document will provide you with a rationale and an overview encompassing all subjects and all ages. The books and papers emerging from Canada's Project Talk: A Medium for Learning and Change are just as revealing, helpful and practical.

It is always healthy to take a mirror to one's own teaching practice, and even those of you who are justifiably proud of your efforts in this area might do worse than use some form of analysis of your own classroom interaction. Apart from the questions I have suggested, and the strategies suggested in the UK Oracy Project, there are a number of quite scientific systems of classroom analysis, widely used in action research, which you could investigate. Included among these is the now old-fashioned one by Flanders (1970) which I used, at first complacently, to look at my own teaching. I hope you receive less of a shock than I did in discovering how far my teaching, and my clients' perspectives of it, differed from my own image of what we were doing.
As an important corollary to this activity, it is very important to look at the social health of our classroom — and that means the students' relationships with each other as well as our relationships with them individually and collectively. Obviously there is no point in starting a cooperative venture if the students misinterpret our desire to cooperate as weakness — if there is hostility instead of goodwill between us and them, or among themselves. If this is the case, we are probably kidding ourselves that by whatever means we 'keep them quiet' they are actually learning anything worthwhile. This is particularly true of 'bad classes'.

What is a 'bad class'? Thirty individual human beings who all have families and pets and toys and books and friends, but who respond in school to an image of collective badness. All of us tend to behave according to others' expectations — that is, when we are expected to be bad or stupid, we will be. The trouble is, schools and teachers rarely have the patience, or believe that they have the time, to reverse these expectations. As teachers, we are easily driven into fulfilling the students' expectations of us. Moreover, our own amour-propre is at stake: we are threatened personally. We should ask ourselves: have we ever genuinely listened to the children in one of these classes (that we all hate and try to avoid teaching) — listened with a genuine desire to address their agendas instead of our own? This is not sentimental but cold logic, which demands courage to acknowledge and implement. If we don't listen to them, why should they listen to us?

Probably the next thing is to look at those areas where we don't incorporate children's talk, and ask ourselves if the emphasis is on what and how the children learn, and whether our methods or resources incorporate ways of making the knowledge useful to them. For instance, the textbook we use: have the exercises we set any purpose or satisfaction for the students beyond the time it takes to complete them? We have our educational objectives, but do we invite or try to incorporate any of theirs? To what extent do the tasks invoke new knowledge and challenges? Would we be prepared to do this exercise ourselves and feel any satisfaction from it? Could it be better done by a group of students? Next, start to work out how much of what we offer in individual-centred packages can be retranslated into social learning strategies, particularly into problem solving.
The most insidious and pervasive myth in teaching, to which most of us respond automatically with the cringe of a Pavlov dog, is that time spent in talk is time out of writing; that oracy and literacy are somehow incompatible. On the contrary, they are the obverse sides of the coin of communication, and in real life one flows from the other, always. Can you imagine a major written business tender which is not discussed in committee, in personal interview, in gossip before its preparation and after its receipt; or a doctor who does not both talk to a patient and document the case? — in teaching as in life then, surely. As a teacher of spoken communication and drama nowadays, I always utilise student documentation, reflection, and subjective and analytical writing during, after and sometimes before the spoken action of my classes. All subject contexts can work the same, or in reverse, if we can reshape our thinking to regard talking tasks as just as significant as writing ones, and validate these in our classrooms. Just a very brief selection of the available ways we can do this are indicated on pages (20-21). It takes the smallest of imaginative leaps to devise written tasks to accompany and enrich the examples of classroom talk structures given there — some are already incorporated.

Certainly the most insidious way in which this mythology of writing versus talking squats on our schools' curriculum is in the area of assessment. As mentioned earlier, the extract from the technology lesson (page 14) was from an assessment exercise. Many of us recognise the power of MacNamara's Law: 'In education we teach what we can assess, rather than assessing some of what we teach'. That passage shows how, in a technological subject, talk can be effectively used to monitor and assess progress. It may often be more accurate than written documentation, where what is assessed is to a degree likely to be the student's power of written expression — the ability to transform technical understanding into a medium over which the student has limited control. Most students have control over their speech. If you do not know any way of assessing orally, why not go to those of your colleagues who are used to assessing spoken performance because it is part of their curriculum — teachers of modern languages, of practical science, of drama, and of spoken English. Ask them what kinds of tasks they set, examine their criteria and their reporting methods. There's lots of good stuff in the schools already.
Some subject syllabuses and work programs incorporate oral assessment, even at Senior Certificate level. However, this is rarely more than a fraction of the total assessment. Moreover, apparently there is as yet no effective and cost-effective way to test oral skills on a large scale; all of the core skills identified in Queensland's new tertiary entrance standardised tests are tested through written tasks. Are no talking skills core educational skills?

If you are an educational administrator
Your ears may already be burning over the last paragraph, or (I hope) you may be inspired to swing your school's weight behind all moves to create not just a talking/learning environment but a talking system of assessment and evaluation.

In your hands, of course, is the opportunity and challenge to create a positive talking environment which does not devalue our most precious form of communicating with each other, deliberately or by default. If you are in the primary sector, a worthy minimal aim is to ensure that no child of yours innocently vents that terrible indictment: 'talking stops you working'. If you are in the secondary school, you have the harder task, not only of preventing your school reinforcing that 'learning', but of reversing the damage already done, restoring to the students their preschool view of themselves as good communicators.

Consciousness-raising is the first step. This paper's title exists to be disproved. At whatever level you administer, it does not cost money to start people thinking — for instance, to pass a few dogeared copies of this paper round your staff and make sure they at least read it and think about it. Mind you, it wouldn't hurt you to consider whether some funds should be diverted into professional development in this area.

At every level . . . so, if you are the Minister for Education or a Senior Education Systems official, pin your ears back for a moment. Some years ago (1980) the Queensland Education Department instituted a useful project about talk in the schools called Study Talk. It shared with the UK and Canadian oracy projects, which have been extensively quoted, many of their characteristics, particularly the
'grassroots' approach to research. The scale was different, though. They did it boots and all, fairly cheaply, but incorporating very large numbers of teachers and authorities (on a progress-oriented, voluntary basis). They amassed an enormous amount of data. Much more important, this process resulted in areas, schools and groups of teachers evolving quite new patterns of teaching for themselves which have given new life to their own teaching, and involved the children — and in many cases parents and the local community too — in what is a peaceful but radical change in the schools.

The very honest evaluation of Queensland's Study Talk project (Fairbairn, 1982) noted a number of major difficulties in its operation, including the paucity of materials internationally. Now at least there are a lot more materials. So two final questions: can the systemic commitment and resources be found, here in Queensland, to support such a project? And what's it worth to our school children?

1. As early as the 1950s the Director of Education for West Riding of Yorkshire (UK), Sir Alec Clegg, observed that students from primary schools that privileged creative arts and interactive approaches in their timetables scored consistently higher than other primary schools in the 11+ grammar school entry examinations, which tested only literacy, numeracy and IQ. More recently, startling reinforcement of this has been provided by US projects, including the Harvard University Project Zero, which have indicated improvement levels of up to 25 per cent in literacy and numeracy with regular doses of creative arts.
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