

# LEARNING TO TALK

A research project at Saffron Walden County High School led by the University of Cambridge and the University of Oslo using Talkwall to develop dialogue in the classroom

Sarah Boggis - Teacher of English, Debbie Chadwick - Teacher of Science and Sarah Makepeace - Teacher of Geography, Saffron Walden County High

21st century students are growing up and being educated in a fast-paced, ever changing and increasingly technologically focused world. Yet, whilst technology enables them to access a plethora of information and experiences, its use may detract from the one skill which, it has been argued, has a profound influence on a student's uptake of the education they are offered: oracy (Warwick and Dawes, 2018).

Oracy is a key component in the 'soft skills' set deemed a necessary attribute in an increasingly digitalised society. The 'ability to use the oral skills of speaking and listening' (Wilkinson, 1965) is argued by Warwick and Dawes as one that all students have the right to be taught.

Building on the research of Mercer and others (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Mercer & Hodgkinson, 2008) on the teaching and learning of dialogue in schools, Saffron Walden County High School (SWCHS), along with Honywood School, another Essex secondary comprehensive school, took part in the Digitalised Dialogue Across the Curriculum (DiDiAC) research project, led by the University of Cambridge and the University of Oslo. This focused on how a web-based microblogging software, called Talkwall, could impact on the teaching and learning of dialogue in the classroom. Three classes of Year 7 students and teachers, each from a different subject - English, Geography and Science - were involved.

## THE SWCHS RESEARCH PROCESS

### Testing

Students were put into groups of four and two baseline tests were carried out at the outset of the project: one individual and one a group-based task looking at the four aspects of reasoning. The individual and group tests, based on the Raven's matrices tests, were designed to be of comparable difficulty but were not the same.

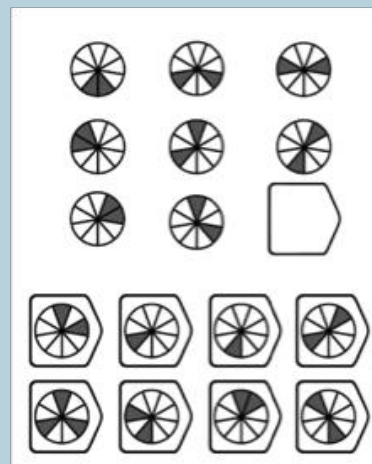
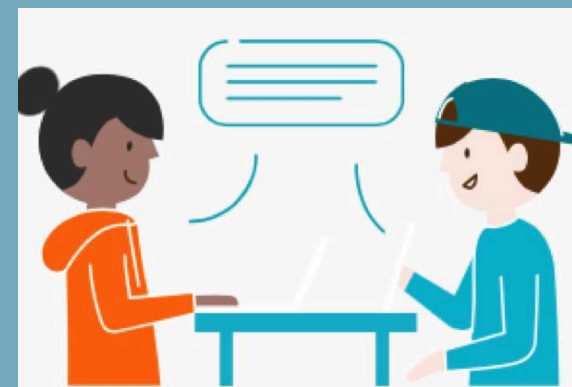


Figure 1: A reasoning test item in the style of Raven's progressive Matrix

### Audit

Furthermore, at the outset of the project, SWCHS teachers reflected on their practice, completing audits which helped to identify common traits of their use of dialogue in the classroom. We were in accordance with many research findings on students' collaboration in groups (see Blatchford & Kutnick, 2003) and agreed that:

- The quality of classroom talk is generally not of a good quality
- When students are assigned roles/tasks within groups, they do not follow instructions well
- Students do not always listen to each other
- Students do not know how to talk and think critically as a group or as an individual
- There are many benefits of working as part of a group compared to working on your own
- The way the teacher communicates with the class is just as important as how students communicate with each other



Contributions are shared on a large screen in the classroom.

As the project progressed, it became increasingly clear to us that 'Dialogue is more than 'just talk'. It involves teachers and learners commenting and cumulatively building on each other's ideas, posing questions and constructing interpretations together' (Alexander, 2008).

### Establishing Ground Rules for Talk

In order to determine quality standards for talk, ground rules for talk in the classroom needed to be decided upon in collaboration with the students. We began by asking students to consider what they thought about the purpose of talk in different contexts. Each class then devised a set of ground rules for talk that they could refer to in lessons every time they were given a dialogic task; this became fundamental when asking students to be dialogic (Dawes, 2008).

The top six rules for talk, taken from the SWCHS English, Geography and Science classrooms, were:

- Show respect to everyone in the group by being mindful of body language, eye contact and tone of voice.
- Listen to everyone's point of view.
- Strive to reach an agreement where possible but accept it is also fine to disagree.
- Question others by asking "Why do you think that?"

**Goal 1:** Helping each other to develop ideas 'Can you say more about that?' 'What do you mean by that?'

**Goal 2:** Listening carefully and recalling information. 'What did your partner say?'

**Goal 3:** Listening and reasoning and coming to an agreement 'Why do you think that?' 'What's your evidence for that?'

Figure 2: An example of Talk prompts for year 7 English students



Figure 3: An example of Talk prompts for year 7 Geography students

that?"

- Explain your point of view by backing up your ideas with reasons
- Try to make the conversation flow by building on each other's ideas.

The rules were referred to in every lesson, resulting in the ideas of respect and challenge beginning to be instilled in the students' behaviour.

### Talk Tools and Dialogic Goals

The introduction of 'talk tools' (Dawes, 2012) was of great benefit to both students and teachers in focusing on the dialogic element of the lesson, before even beginning to introduce the Talkwall software. Helping the students to formulate their dialogic structures was key and, whilst initially there was an inevitable 'clunkiness' to their conversations, fluency and confidence increased surprisingly quickly given the limited hours per subject in the secondary classroom. A simple card prompt was used to remind the students of that lesson's dialogic intention or talk 'goal' as well as being referred to alongside the learning objective by the teachers on a regular basis. For us as teachers, the idea of an expressed 'dialogic intention' underpinning the activity in a lesson proved to be of particular importance.

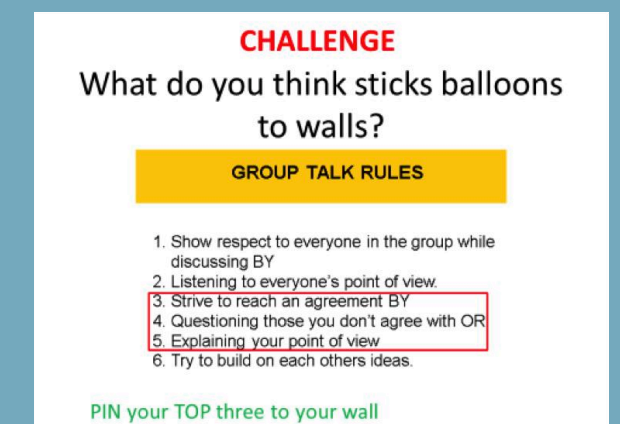


Figure 4: An example of Talk prompts for year 7 Science students



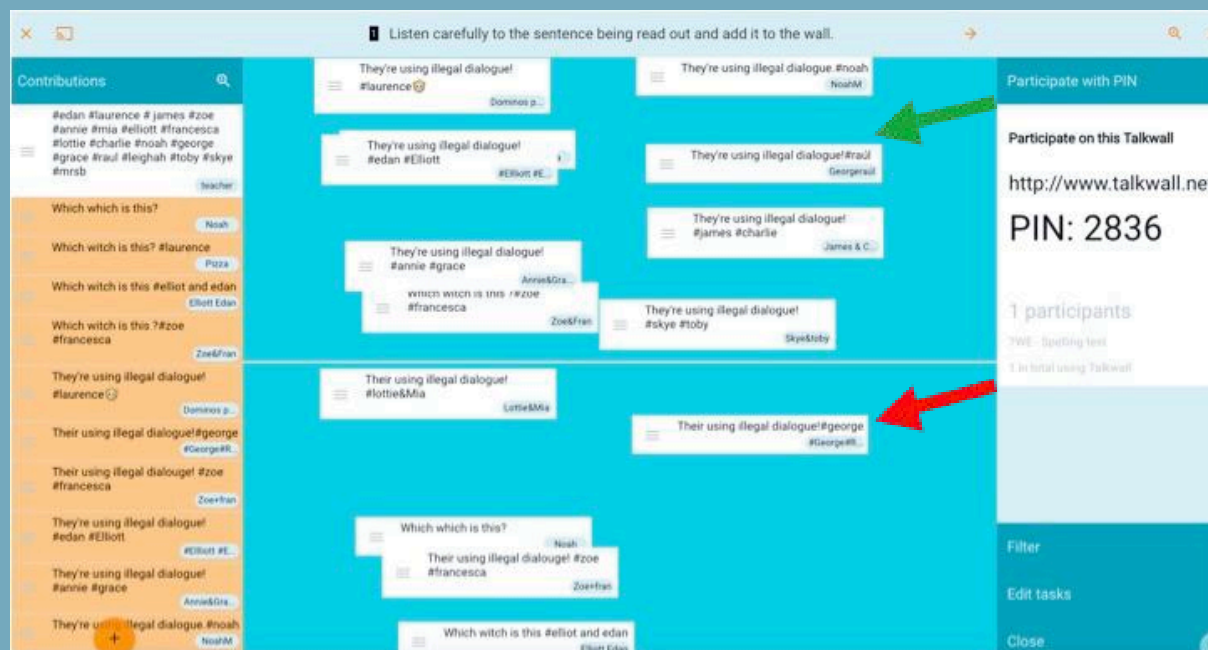


Figure 5: A spelling activity for lower attaining Year 7 English students using the split screen function

Students quickly became proficient in the use of the software given its intuitive design. Teachers were also quickly able to manipulate screens and student responses after some inevitable teething troubles. A variety of tasks were introduced to prompt discussion, to show evidence of comprehension as well as split screen sorting activities being used to give immediate feedback on student responses.

### Developing 21st Century Skills through Talkwall

Talkwall was used to facilitate dialogue in the classroom, but it became increasingly clear that the benefits of using the software were not limited to the encouragement of students speaking to each other; using Talkwall also led to:

- questioning and challenge between students
- tolerance and the acceptance of disagreement
- collaboration
- pride in presenting ideas
- immediacy of response to ideas as they appeared on the screen
- acceptance of making mistakes (their own

and the mistakes of others)

- a safe environment in which to volunteer information which was particularly appreciated by the more timid students
- students feeling empowered - the immediacy of the results of their collaboration on the IWB led to some powerful closing the gap exercises and growth in confidence.

### Outcome - Making it grow

The individual and group tests completed at the end of the project were encouraging. In nearly all cases, working in a group to solve sequential reasoning problems gave better results than working individually, even for the highest individual achievers. This was true in both the pre- and post-intervention work on dialogue and Talkwall, research lessons) tests.

In most cases in the tests after the intervention, individual reasoning scores were higher than in the pre-tests. This meant that the differences in performance on the test was less pronounced than in the pre-test. Nevertheless, group scores were still

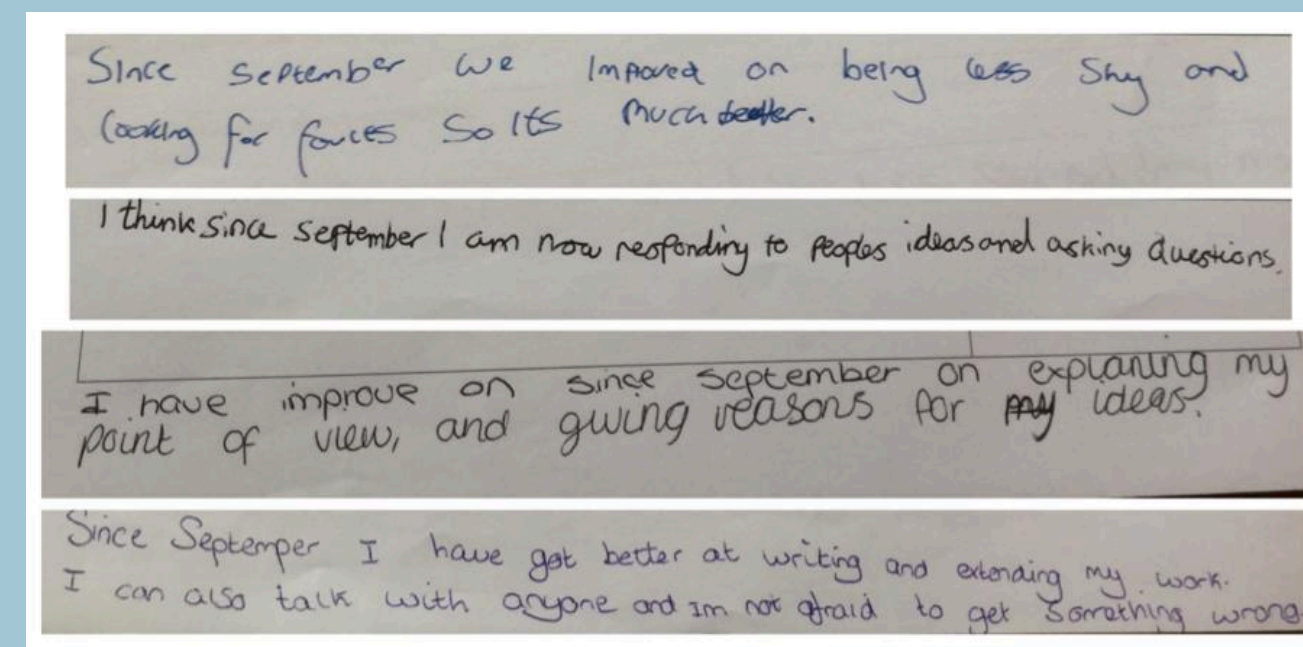


Figure 6: Feedback from lower attaining Year 7 English students

higher than the highest individual scores in all but two cases. Some results in the post-test could not be compared with the pre-test due to a change of focus group. In Norway, the greatest gains across the two tests were for students who scored in the lowest 25% on the pre-test. This analysis has yet to be completed in the UK but anecdotal evidence from the SWCHS students themselves, in this case a lower attaining group, is positive.

### Development of Students and Teachers

In conclusion, students developed by demonstrating:

- greater competence and confidence in talking purposefully in lessons, particularly in areas such as asking good questions, giving reasons and justifications, and building productively on the ideas of others; sensible and purposeful use of the technology to gather, organise ideas and manipulate ideas in a variety of ways;
- use of a broader range of ideas as a stimulus for thinking and discussion;
- greater confidence and facility in assessing the productiveness of their talk for learning in groups.

As practitioners, we felt that we gained:

- an increasing competence and confidence with the use of Talkwall technology for whole class and group activity;
- development and integration of ground rules for talk in the research classrooms;
- a detailed focus on learning intentions, linked to talk for learning, in lesson planning;
- an increase in innovation and creativity in our teaching that has surrounded the work with Talkwall and will have a lasting impact on our future practice.

### References

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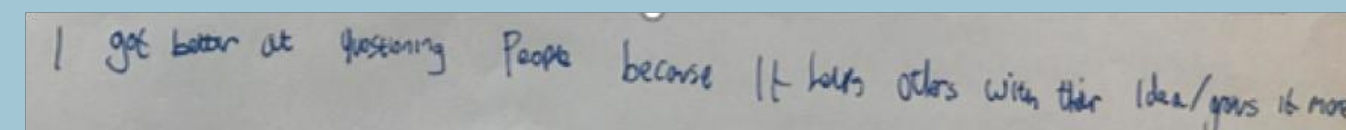


Figure 7: Feedback from lower attaining Year 7 English student. "I got better at questioning people because it helps others with their idea / grows it more."