I don’t know what to write!” protests Stuart. Thirty seconds later: ‘Miss, I don’t know how to start?’ It’s Adam—this time. I nod and smile patiently, but in my head there is confusion and frustration. Why don’t they ‘get it’? Hadn’t I invited the pupils’ contributions? Didn’t we all explore the ideas? Had I not encouraged and provided formative feedback? Was I the problem?

According to Neil Mercer’s *The Guided Construction of Knowledge*, I am the problem! I had engaged in a variation of what he calls the ‘I.R.F’ (Initiation—Response—Feedback) model of teacher-learner talk. My teaching techniques were part of a pre-existing socio-cultural teacher-learner exchange steeped in the traditional identities of education. My teacher-talk, however well intentioned, placed me in charge of the construction of knowledge and constrained pupils’ understanding. Over the years, I suspect I had become quite adept at disguising the I.R.F model; I have tried to give pupils more control by asking them to define, discuss and adapt tasks, and to work in groups and assess their own progress. But, perhaps, no amount of this type of ‘talk’ would give me an opportunity to hand over control to a pupil.

And Mercer’s advice? A teacher should ‘question whether their established and habitual ways of talking, in the circumstances, provide the best kind of guidance and support for the learner’. I considered that, having structured tasks using the I.R.F model, I might also have developed other routines that kept me in control and not the pupil. An uncomfortable hypothesis was emerging: teacher involvement, with all its socio-historic baggage, hinders learning if it prevents new and alternative identities that enable talk for the benefit of learners. Mercer challenged me to deconstruct my own habits and look for the barriers preventing Stuart and Adam from striking out on their own.

As an English teacher, and SENCO from September 2011, much of my work centred on classes like Stuart’s. Several members of this teaching set had been identified as having BESD traits and there had been strategy
meetings with the Head of Year, reports cards, observations by the inclusion manager, rewards, sanctions and increased contact with families. The methods of reporting on the class’s behaviour had also positioned the teacher in the role of an observer who undertook a time/interval sample of the class members. Our focus on behaviour had been interpreted by the class as a call for their silence. This prevented any real teacher-pupil dialogue and unintentionally created many barriers to talk.

Ironically, Shirley Clarke’s Assessment for/as Learning team had reported that lower achievers had been the beneficiaries of ‘talk partners’ with two types of progress being evident. There were social benefits (e.g., tolerance, empathy and support) which were reported as soon as her first feedback session, and cognitive developments (e.g., an increase in quantifiable measurable ‘higher quality writing’). With the intentions of counteracting the class’s silence, I wanted to see if ‘talk partner’ work could improve behaviour and writing. Might Stuart’s class be able to identify effective writing at word, sentence and text level and apply this understanding to their own written work? Could Stuart, Adam and the like, develop the confidence to move from talking to writing without me?

There is no shortage of research into talk as an important element in social and cognitive development. Jean Gross (appointed Communication Champion in 2008 by the Children’s Secretary at the time) stated that, without help, a third of children with speech, language and communication difficulties could go on to have mental health problems and, in one study, two thirds of young offenders had language problems. This was unsettling for me as a teacher. The relationship between talk and writing has also been a matter for educationalists: Hannaford’s muscle memory suggests that talk turns learning into neurophysiologic process involving proprioceptors in the face which aids recall when writing; Shirley Clarke’s ‘talk partners’ work, as part of the Assessment as Learning approach, advocates pupils engaging in more talk around texts whilst mindful of success criteria and objectives; Wells’ meaning makers highlights the need for pupil-teacher shared vocabulary to be explored alongside its use; and Bereiter’s progressive discourse encourages teacher and pupil to have equal participation in discussion. But, to a greater or lesser extent, all of these models involve the teacher.

Was there any way of managing the classroom so that tasks that move from talking to writing were not initiated, responded to or fed-back on by the teacher? Over the course of a half term, dedicating at least half the lesson to ‘talk’, I set about trying to find out.
Pupil-Initiated Tasks

I borrowed the model of the BTec assignment scenario with the aim of allowing pupils to initiate the task. It was a ‘set-up’ aimed at capturing the moment when a task is conceived so that the pupil partly initiates it. Could pupils catch the task like a wave and not just be pulled along in its wake or dumped in its trough? The pupils were presented with (although my use of the passive voice here somewhat disguises the fact that I did the presenting) a scenario linked to the Olympics games: the exclusion of community members who would not be directly attending the events. Pupils began by recalling what they had heard about the extortionate prices and impossibility of attending because of the unjust method by which tickets had been allocated. I mapped out their comments on the white board. My intention was to wait for an opportunity to repeat back to the class something that might incite an action; I imagined it would be like holding a mirror up to the talkers until the idea of one pupil would provoke action in another. It was Stuart who complained about the socially exclusive nature of the Olympics which, he suggested, should be met with a spirit of non-cooperation by the residents of local communities. He seemed quite fervent in his views! I finished this branch of the mind map with a question: what form of non-cooperation and who would know he was protesting if he simply stayed quiet?

The discussion took off a little: TV interviews were suggested; the organising of a protest march and then Twitter. At last, the chance to foreground the importance of the written word. Stuart could tweet his intentions. The novelty of the method, or the imperative behind the idea, fuelled the discussion, which I mind-mapped right up to the point that pupils realised that this was still a pen and paper exercise. On reflection, I did feel that there was a moment where they took control: they knew more than me about Twitter and they were pleased by the immediacy with which their message would be transmitted. The traditional teacher-pupil relationship was at least stirred if not shaken.

Our lack of immediate access to Twitter prevented progress though and the promise of deferred gratification did not bridge their interest into the following lesson. This must be why assistive technology (voice activated software, talking tins, predictive text, read aloud technology) is so important when working with those for whom writing is the barrier. What they had achieved in talk remained too far from the written form. Perhaps the task might have worked better had there been a resource ready to which they could contribute. Although, if this been the case, I
think I would have steered them towards that outcome instead of letting them have the responsibility of initiating the task. A pre-conceived resource would also have prevented the pupils from setting in place their own paradigms—an important part of successfully controlling a task. The scenario approach had enabled the pupils to initiate an idea, but my response was woefully inadequate—I could not deliver an unanticipated Twitter lesson. However, there may have been some latent rewards for pupil writing: initiating the task’s format may have empowered pupils in self-starting an answer because they had the experience of creating something. Rather reductively in teaching terms, initiation may also have had an impact on the content and format based key stage 3 assessment focuses 1, 2 and 4. But, most importantly, Stuart’s learner identity had temporarily altered—he had surfed on the crest of a wave by initiating an idea. The fragile identity of an emerging writer does not easily overcome the barrier of time delays I also realised.

**Pupil-led Response**

Mercer’s ‘response’ phase proved difficult to understand and so I returned to the book: ‘response’ is described as the stage at which learner talk is incorporated into the teaching-learning process by the teacher. Mercer’s advice was to teach pupils communicative and intellectual strategies to encourage responses in other pupils, but he also admitted to not giving enough space to children’s social identities. However, to me, identity seemed an extremely important factor in a response. The traditional relationship between the teacher and the pupil, where phrases such as ‘I like the way you have done that’ or ‘can you explain why that decision was made?’, would have an altogether different impact if they came from a peer. Even if I could incite more pupil responses, there might still be an identity problem around pupils receiving a response in a setting where there was a tradition of competition, not collaboration.

With the aim of extricating myself from the ‘response phase’, I embraced the idea of the Socratic discussion model. My small class was sub-divided: a central group that would handle the talk firsthand, and a second group that would summarise and extend the talk—a sort of metacognitive role to the first group—by responding to the initial ideas of others. I planned to stay well out of it! I tried to learn from the scenario task, and waited for them to comment on the two groups I had created—it did not take long.

There were some grumblings about why am I here? Why is he there? It was evident that their lack of confidence was not restricted to the written
word. Peer scrutiny of talk was also threatening. Empathetically, I indulged the discussion around the first group’s feelings of a perceived threat for a few moments and then asked them to question me directly about why the task was set up in this way, which they did. As all eyes narrowed accusingly, I suggested that this could be a collaborative process. After all, the task required another person to respond supportively to their ideas, not to crush them. I aligned myself with them by saying defensively it did not always have to be me that responded. Their reaction reminded me how deeply entrenched the teacher-pupil relationship is in authority. Do pupils only value my response? The activity went badly.

Over the course of the next four lessons, I asked partners to discuss their own work, that of a ‘past pupil’, and something that I had, anonymously, written. These activities, from my usual repertoire of talk activities, went well but it was difficult to present the work to the class without an agenda behind it. Somehow the task lacked imagination; pupils went through the motions of deconstructing the text with rather glib responses that showed that they could see good writing when they were directed to it, but the activities lacked a personal investment.

Later that month I planned to role play the process of responding to another person. I told them about my Samaritans training and how emotional and dramatic responses were discouraged in favour of something less judgemental. They were certainly interested in learning more about the calls I had taken. As Samaritans, we had been trained through role-play scenarios and encouraged to follow some ground rules. First, let someone finish talking, and check that it was a good moment to respond before jumping in; second, start your response with a repetition of something that had been said and seek clarification if needed; next, incorporate tentative modal verbs into the response (could, might, would etc.); finally, keep questions open and ask why a lot.

Through a single scenario, the class explored a range of responses and discussed their impact. The pupils read the first few lines that began a dialogue, and then they were able to make a series of appropriate responses to the caller/talker. Possibly because of the vulnerability of those contacting the Samaritans, Stuart’s class tuned in to the importance of language choice and its effects. It seemed that pupils thought carefully about their responses as Mercer said pupils might.

The potential for pupils to respond to each other was there but, for this group, it was in a fragile balance with pupil identities. Disguising their own vulnerable identities, in the form of a caller, was safer. On reflection, however, I think what made the biggest difference was the fact that, for
them, my identity had altered. The teacher role was momentarily discarded when I described myself in another role as a Samaritan and the usual teacher-pupil relationship shifted. Some dialogue took place that was not entrenched in the usual classroom teacher-learner relationship rut, and that helped to change the routines and habits of the usual exchange. There was a knock on effect for collaborative writing; when the task was recalled, most pupils in the class could manage the feedback process with more sensitivity.

**Pupil-led Feedback**

On this occasion I was experimenting with creative writing. My aim was to have the pupils provide feedback on the impact of the writing. I started with a Youtube interview with Sir Elton John who said of his creative process, ‘I always start with the lyrics.’ The melody for the song emerged from the natural stress and intonation of the words in the lyrics, and the song’s tempo was created by the line structure. I wondered whether Stuart and Adam could understand the impact of language by aligning the words of a text with a song’s melody.

As a starter to four lessons, pupils read words and texts against the ticking of a metronome. I was amazed by how difficult they found the identification of syllables. (Note to self: research on syllabification.) They—and not I, of course—progressed to reading the words of songs they knew where they struggled to read without melody! We compared the differing impact of ‘Teenage Dirtbag’ being performed by the ukulele orchestra and Wheatus and the way in which artists can foreground ideas for the listener through stress and melody. When faced with the lyrics of a song pupils did not know, they tried to create a melody from the natural intonation of the words in front of them. It was interesting—and amusing—for me when they heard the artist’s version.

And then we came to a piece of writing. I used a chase through a ravine from Ray Bradbury’s *The Whole Town’s Sleeping*—and was helped somewhat by the fact that the text makes explicit reference to its own cinematic and musical techniques. Here we were successful in our aim of understanding the impact of the sentences in the short story. Adam, among others, made the connection between the song lyric work and this text. (Although, if this leap has not been made, I think I would have asked them to bridge the task by recalling the music and then the features that usually accompanied a chase scene.) I had to focus the class on the moments of the chase where there was an escalation of tension and they commented on the sentence structures.
And then we had a go at writing our own moment of tension. Prompted by a few bars from the *Jaws* theme tune, we tried to map words on to the melody and use the pauses to demarcate clauses and sentences. The initiation of the task had come from me; the task was heavily scaffolded through carefully planned stages which were heavily resourced, but what worked well was the feedback—it was almost entirely managed by the pupil and their peers. Where the words worked with a sense of the tune, there was pride in the sound of their writing; where it did not work, there was an understanding of why. Stuart and Adam started to feel like writers. Pupils may have accepted the feedback from each other because the outcome either worked or it didn’t; it was a mapping exercise where the pupils partly had a sense of their own success in advance of the feedback. The criterion for success was mostly an objective decision and not left up to the interpretation of the individual. Pupils felt their efforts could be safely shared with peers and that they could accept a small amount of feedback leading to an overall judgement. For my part, I realised that I had not had to give (or diplomatically modify) the feedback, which felt good. In fact, I’d said very little!

There had been some success in trying to move away from the teacher-led ‘Initiation—Response—Feedback’ model. I was reminded that one important skill in teaching is to be observant of the behaviours of the pupils and find opportunities to explicitly question the pupil-teacher relationship, but reconciling this with clear timings and pre-planned visual support in the form of written resources that dovetailed into a planned scheme of work with aims mapped against the learning objectives in a jam-packed key stage 3 curriculum, is tricky!

For me, and my relationship with Stuart and Adam’s class, it was difficult to fight the role that had been assigned to me as the fountain of knowledge and meaning—although it was helpful to have a few more strategies to disguise my role within the task. As for behaviour and improved classroom relationships, there had been moments of harmony. Most significantly, I was now looking for opportunities to re-invent teacher and pupil identities in order that the roles, routines and habits that characterised the usual teacher-pupil talk were sidestepped. The role of the teacher was not redundant, it just needed some reconfiguration. Looking ahead, I hope that future talk tasks will see Stuart and Adam incorporating the qualities of a ‘writer’ into their new and emerging identities.
References


7. Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RVt4yQrDmc.