

Classroom Discussions in Education, edited by P Karen Murphy (2018), Routledge, New York and London.

We hear a lot about bubbles and echo chambers these days. People talk only to others who have similar ideas to themselves. Supporters of political parties, believers in conspiracy theories (such as QAnon), members of many other groups continually talk to fellow believers, and seldom seriously consider what outsiders say.

However, we need to acknowledge that we ourselves also exist within bubbles. While perhaps not in the same league as the examples above, philosophy for/with children (P4/wC) advocates and researchers can also fall into the trap of listening only to others within our field. In many ways, this is understandable. Over more than 50 years, the P4/wC literature has ballooned, and it is unlikely that any one person has had the time to be able to read it all, let alone chasing down other literature.

Yet we are not the only people who are interested in classroom discussions. For example, when I was doing my PhD, I read a fascinating and informative book by JT Dillon—*Using Discussion in Classrooms*—which I have never seen referenced in the P4/wC literature.

The book under review here is another example. Published in the Ed Psych Insights series by Routledge, it is edited by P Karen Murphy, the Harry and Marion Royer Eberly Faculty Fellow and Professor of Education at The Pennsylvania State University. Of the eight other contributors to this book, seven are doctoral students, and one a post-doc, at either The Pennsylvania State University or the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This is quite a tight little bubble: the Quality Talk bubble. Quality Talk (QT) is the name of the approach to classroom discussions devised by Murphy and her collaborators.

QT is firmly the focus of the book, despite its much more general (and hence somewhat misleading) title. While eleven other classroom discussion programs get a mention, this is mostly only in passing. Philosophy for Children, for example, is merely mentioned twice: the only P4C work referenced is a 1995 paper by Ann Sharp. To be fair, the authors do refer the reader to several more detailed studies carried out by members of their bubble, where nine of these programs were analysed for insights to be drawn on when devising Quality Talk.

The book contains five chapters. The first sets out the aim of QT: a focus on 'ways to optimize small-group discussion so as to maximize students' deep, meaningful

learning about text and content through quality talk', building 'critical-analytic thinking and reasoning' and 'high level comprehension' of the text (p. 2 ff). The theoretical background advanced draws particularly on Vygotsky—unsurprisingly, Bandura's sociocognitive theory—understandably, and Kintsch's Construction Integration Model—a body of work unfamiliar to me, but which focuses on the 'construction of more complex representational maps', both within and beyond the text. The idea is familiar, but it strikes me that we could find out more about Kintsch's work.

Chapter Two takes a closer look at the multiple roles played in discussion by students and teachers and how these develop over time. After a critique of the common IRE (Initiate, Respond, Evaluation) pattern that passes for discussion in many classrooms—with tight teacher control—the authors develop a taxonomy of elements that contribute to quality talk, and of the roles both students and teachers ought to take on. Arguing that facilitation should gradually fade, they say 'despite the release in responsibility during the small-group discussion, teachers still exert a tremendous impact on student talk and the outcome of the discussion by addressing the aforementioned challenges, even if the proportion of teacher talk to student talk is low' (p. 37). There is a good deal of emphasis on the challenging role of the teacher as facilitator. I found the analytic categories used in this chapter a mixture of the familiar and the new. Certainly, this is an opportunity for cross fertilisation.

Factors that impact on discussions are addressed in Chapter Three. It is claimed that better gains are made in small groups (pp. 3-4) than medium (pp. 5-7) or whole class: 'students exhibited higher levels of interest and text engagement during peer-led small-group discussions than teacher-dominant whole-group discussions' (p. 58). Immediately I wondered, 'but what about whole class communities of inquiry', which are not teacher dominated? Was any such comparison made? It isn't clear, but I suspect not. Other factors explored are whether the groups ought to be mixed ability or streamed, the role of gender, and the influence of prior knowledge and perceived interest.

Chapter Four looks at student learning outcomes, and reports on research that shows QT improves many cognitive processes, including critical-analytic thinking, argumentation, epistemic cognition (students' beliefs about knowledge and knowing), and relational reasoning (distinguishing meaningful patterns)—all illustrated with excerpts from QT discussions. Again, the claim is made that small group discussions are more efficacious than whole class discussions (and they in turn

are better than lectures). Again, it is not clear just what sort of whole class discussions were tested.

Throughout my reading of these four chapters, I was constantly perplexed: small group discussions, preferably involving three to four students, develop the students' abilities best, yet they require the close attention of the teacher. In a real-world classroom, how can we square this circle? How can a teacher be fully there for maybe six or eight discussion groups simultaneously? I found the answer, when it came in Chapter Five, quite unsatisfactory. Especially in elementary [primary] classrooms, the rest of the students 'complete an assignment or read silently' (p. 107). To me, this means students are doing 'make-work' maybe 75 to 85% of the time devoted to discussions, even if the group size is increased to four to six students.

We all know that there can be challenges in running a whole class community of inquiry, particularly in giving all a chance to contribute (and short, small-group breakouts can help here). Yet, to me, those students are being exposed to the advantages of rigorous discussion for the entirety of the time devoted to it—and listening may well be at least as important as talking for making gains.

That said, the detailed exposition of QT in the last chapter contains much that should be of interest to P4/wC theorists and practitioners. It covers four areas:

(a) the ideal instructional frame for implementing Quality Talk, (b) the specific discourse elements identified as indicators of high-level comprehension, (c) the ways in which teachers can model and scaffold the discussions, as well as (d) the pedagogical principles teachers must embrace and employ as they implement Quality Talk. (p. 105)

There is a good deal of 'chalk-face' advice and practical tips, mixed with well thought through analysis of matters such as the nature of quality questions and responses. I was especially interested in the insistence that discourse elements—what we might call cognitive moves—need to be taught explicitly to students prior to discussions. Indeed, in an outline of QT professional development, much is made of the need to get teachers analysing discussions—both from transcripts and, in real time, from videos—to identify the various discourse elements and how they were encouraged, modelled or ignored.

In summary, I found it most interesting to look into another 'classroom discussions' bubble. There was plenty of food for thought, alternative ways of analysing things

that we are all interested in, and quite a number of ideas that could be easily adapted into P4/wC theory and practice. I couldn't help thinking that there were many riches in our own body of work that Murphy and her colleagues could usefully incorporate. Perhaps we need to be bursting bubbles more often.

Postscript: I reviewed the online ebook version, and I have to say I found it less than satisfactory. The ordinary text was OK, but the figures were often difficult to read. It is possible to increase the ordinary text size, but this has no effect on illustrations, meaning I struggled to read transcripts and reproductions of course material. What's more, I missed the joy of holding a real book.

Tim Sprod

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