

## 8 Other learning through talking

An important aspect of evaluation through observation is to consider whether the best method is being used by thinking of *alternatives*. It is useful to consider during an observation how else the lesson might proceed.

This section is not meant as a comprehensive set of approaches to learning through talking, but to invite reflection on the respective advantages of several very different alternatives. This should be done both with regard to the type of learning they promote, and with regard to the development of spoken language.

### Formal debates

These are characterized by two opposing viewpoints which are regarded as irreconcilable. The aim is to win a majority in a final vote.

The starting point is a carefully worded proposition which heightens the conflict between views. There are opportunities for this in many subjects, for example 'Britain should prevent any more nuclear power stations being built on its soil'. It should be noted that this will lead to a different kind of exchange to the tentative development of thinking which often characterizes small group discussions. In debates, speakers are expected to be persuasive and forceful, to demolish an opponent's case, to use sarcasm and wit to win over the audience.

They have a set format and agreed rules. They typically begin with two speakers for and two against the motion. Then others seek permission to speak, but in turns i.e. one speaker for, one against, and so on. Before a vote is taken, the opening speaker on each side has a final chance to convince the assembly before the vote.

Strict time limits are observed, for example three minutes each for the first four speakers, then a maximum of two minutes per speaker. This requires speakers to be concise but forceful, and select carefully their key points and examples.

In formal debating competitions, speakers are expected to be able to speak convincingly for a viewpoint which is not their own. This is more difficult for beginners.

Participants should be given the opportunity to prepare for a debate by researching the issue, if the theme is unfamiliar.

## **Role play**

This is a kind of simulation in which participants are given a role, or choose one from the selection which is offered. Beginners often find this easier than a formal debate for two reasons: firstly, they have a fuller sense of the person whose arguments they are articulating and their real-life interest in the issue, and secondly, pretending they are someone else provides a kind of protection – they feel less exposed.

Role play can be organized on various scales. Even in a small group, participants can be assigned a role. A larger scale role play could involve an initial discussion which prepares the ground for a larger one. For example, in an activity on human rights, each group may play the part of a different special interest group such as children, teenage girls, a religious minority etc. and formulate the specific rights of that group. Then, in a larger forum (similar to parliament or a United Nations assembly), the different claims are presented and discussed.

## **Expert hearings**

An expert hearing involves invited speakers to share their knowledge and experience. It has similarities with a public hearing or parliamentary Committee. It can involve speakers with different roles. The topic may be a real current issue, or it may be a simulation. Examples include a proposal to build an extra airport runway, or to close a swimming baths or school, or to sell off the country's forests and open spaces.

It can be particularly interesting when it relates to young people's encounters with officials, for example a police officer asked about youth criminality, violence or drug abuse.

It can also form part of a larger activity, e.g. providing an opportunity to examine the facts behind a newspaper story, or as part of a media project in which the pupils produce a school newspaper or website.

Pupils can be involved at different stages, including:

- discussing whom to invite, sending the invitations and organizing the event
- preparing questions beforehand
- asking questions, challenging inadequate answers, asking for evidence
- speaking after the platform contributions from the experts.

Invited speakers should be briefed if they are not used to meeting young people. The dangers are:

- they provide too many technical or procedural details
- they are too abstract and don't give examples
- they use too much jargon
- they try to frighten their audience with extreme incidents
- they fail to respond to questions which sound vague or naïve

- they react badly to questions which they think are disrespectful.

### **Hot seating**

This originated as a technique in theatre production and drama education. A character from the play steps out of the action but not out of role. For example, Lady Macbeth, in the 'hotseat', faces questions from the audience: why she is so keen to be queen, what are her moral beliefs, what she really thinks of characters in the play, what she sees as the greatest danger.

Normally only the person in the hotseat is in role, the others being just themselves. Alternatively, they might have roles such as historian, psychiatrist, detective. An extension of hot seating would be a simulation of a courtroom, with the character on trial.

As well as characters in a play, hot seating can be applied to the study of a real-life situation. The person in the hot seat could be, for example, President Bush justifying starting the Iraq war. It could be a personification of a collective entity: the questioners confront the British Empire about its impact on Africa or India, or, to take a current example, the Banks for their role in the crisis. Here again, the questioners might be in role, e.g. as subject peoples of the empire, as people who have lost their jobs as a result of the financial crisis.

Questions used in hotseating might probe motives, or speculate about future possibilities:

Did you feel in control of events?

Tell us about your childhood. How did you become the person you are?

Have you any regrets?

How do you see the future?

### **Suggestions for discussion**

- Which of the above have you used, as an alternative to open (class or group) discussion?
- How could each be used within your subject?
- Are some more suitable to a particular age group? How might you need to adapt the others?
- How does the adoption of roles make a difference?
- In pairs or a larger group, make arrangements to experiment with one or more of the above, and arrange to observe each other and give feedback.