

Dialogic book talk – have a go

For this activity you will need to work with a small group of children. It is useful, but not always easy, to try to make some sort of record of the talk. You could try audio recording if you feel this will not affect the children's talk. Or you could ask another adult to make notes, or make notes yourself immediately after the session, trying to capture as closely as possible what children said. Sometimes it is only later that you fully appreciate children's contributions.

Introduction

What is dialogic book talk? A group activity in which adult and children together develop shared understandings of a book through talk. It is a collaborative act of enquiry, in which participants:

- Use language for thinking
- Make connections to things they already know
- Ask questions of the book
- Explore the book at different levels
- Give reasons for what they say

Undertaking all of these activities takes children into the first stages of critical response to texts.

What to do

Choosing your book

Books can be fiction or non-fiction, but they must be of high quality. If you don't enjoy reading the book and/or looking at the illustrations, and if the book does not make you think and ask questions, it is probably not a good choice. Look through the book and/or read it several times over the course of a few days; you may have new thoughts about it each time.

Planning for dialogic book talk

Although you will not be able to follow an inflexible script in a book talk session, without planning the talk may be unfocused and unproductive – or indeed the children may not want to talk at all. You need to think about possible lines of enquiry and be well prepared. Is there anything about the book which is puzzling or where readers might have different views? You may find it helpful to think about aspects such as:

- Setting – where and when does the story happen? How do we know?
- Characters – real or fantasy? What are their relationships with each other? Are some more important to the story than others?
- Events – could things have turned out differently? Are we really sure what did happen? (Many children's classics can be interpreted in different ways – and sometimes the illustrations seem to tell a slightly different story.)

For non-fiction texts you might consider:

- What is the subject of the book? Is it telling us things we don't know?
- How is the book organised? What signposts are there to the information?
- Who might find this book useful?
- What information do the pictures give you?

- What else would we like to know?
- How is this book different from a story book?

Once you have some ideas for where the conversation could go, you will be able to drop in prompts as necessary – perhaps to start things off, or when one line of enquiry has been exhausted but the children are not able to change direction.

Leading the session

Dialogic book talk may begin with you reading the book to the children or they may read it for themselves, or the talk may be based entirely on the pictures. It is not a question and answer session in which you ask a series of questions, often of the ‘Who’s this?’ or ‘What happened next?’ type. Such question often means that children give very short answers, talk only to you rather than to the whole group, and never ask their own questions of the text.

During the session:

- Allow pauses and thinking time – don’t rush in to fill gaps in the talk.
- Try to use prompts such as ‘I wonder why...’ rather than direct questions such as ‘Why does...’ This suggests that you really want to know, rather than that you already have the answer and are checking whether the children know it.
- You need to be ready to move things on if children have nothing to say or are going round in circles.
- Expect children to listen to each other first time round rather than making them repeat what they’ve said, or repeating it for them, though you may wish to recast it in order to encourage other children to contribute.
- Listen carefully to everything the children say – be ready for the flash of insight from the child who doesn’t seem to have been listening at all.
- Be prepared to let the conversation go in directions which you hadn’t expected.
- Encourage children to go back to the book to look again at pictures, and re-read for them bits they refer to. The activity is not a test of memory, and going back often gives an opportunity to go deeper or change your mind.
- Stop when the children start to show that they have had enough.

Reflecting on the session

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| What did you observe? | What did the children learn? | What did you learn? |
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You might like to consider some of the following points:

- Did all the children join in, and did any of them tend to dominate the talk?
- Did the children ask questions about the book without being prompted? Did they answer each others’ questions or expect you to answer them? Did their questions lead to interesting discussion?
- Did they listen to and develop each others’ ideas?
- Did they have ideas about the book which you hadn’t thought of?
- Did any of the words they used surprise you?

If you were disappointed by the session, because the children seemed to have little to say or the talk was fragmented and superficial, look again at your planning? Would a different book have worked better? Had you prepared some interesting lines of enquiry? Do remember, though, that the children may not be used to this sort of activity and it may be some time before it works well.

You may already have a collection of favourite books which work well for dialogic book talk. If not it is useful to start to build up such a collection, rather than planning for a new book each time.