

Research Article

To what extent can oracy education and student dialogue support historical thinking skills in Year 7?

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Abstract

During the course of my teacher training, I have encountered two distinct classroom contexts for oracy: a term that refers to the ability to express oneself in speech. At my first placement school, very few students were willing to answer questions or present arguments in front of their peers. Conversely, the majority of students at my second placement school are keen to demonstrate their knowledge, yet often speak over one another during discussion tasks. In both schools, dialogue is mainly directed towards the teacher; students rarely offer extended answers during lessons, and oral reasoning and argumentation generally take place as a precursor to written work. I therefore wanted to implement a sequence of lessons where the learning was intentionally carried out and measured through student talk and cooperation. In particular, I wanted to examine how far teaching specific oracy skills and providing informal scaffolded opportunities for presentational and exploratory talk can support the development of historical thinking skills in Year 7 (age 11): in other words, students' ability to consider multiple historical perspectives; to appreciate the difference between modern and ancient values; to critically engage with historical terminology, and to present and justify an argument. Students' responses were generally positive and engagement raised. I conclude with further thoughts about future practice.

Keywords: oracy education, debate, Latin, school Classics

Introduction

I carried out this study at an academically selective, state-maintained boys' school in an outer metropolitan borough, where all students in Years 7 and 8 take Latin as a compulsory subject. I delivered the lesson sequence to a mixed-attainment Year 7 Latin class of 31 students, whom I teach three times a fortnight. As this is a Key Stage 3 class, I have more freedom to dedicate lesson time to civilisation topics and oracy than in older years, where most lessons in the lead-up to summative exams are focused on grammar revision and exam technique (i.e. largely written work).

The data for this assignment were collected in line with the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018), published by the British Education Research Association (BERA). All identifying information about the school and participants has been anonymised. I focused on six students in particular, who exhibit a broad range of oracy skills and historical understanding.

- *Asterix* (a high-attaining student who prefers independent to group work and does not like speaking in front of the class);
- *Obelix* (a student who has little interest in Classics and does not volunteer answers during class discussion);

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- *Dogmatix* (a student with an ADHD diagnosis who has difficulty focusing on independent or group tasks, and occasionally struggles to regulate his emotions);
- *Cacophonix* (a lively, chatty student, who is very engaged during group activities and class discussion but occasionally shouts out answers impulsively);
- *Vitalstatistix* (a student who is keen to share his extensive historical knowledge during class discussion, but can display a very fixed mindset during group activities);
- *Getafix* (a dedicated student who offers infrequent but perceptive contributions to class discussion).

Oracy

In 1965, Andrew Wilkinson published an article in the *Educational Review* in which he argued that oral composition had been consistently neglected by the English education system, denigrated as merely a preliminary to written composition (Wilkinson, 1965, 11). He proposed that, alongside literacy and numeracy, schools should strive to develop students' 'oracy', which he defined as 'the ability to use the oral skills of speaking and listening' (Wilkinson, 1965, 13). Despite this early intervention, however, it was not until 1989 that the government began developing the National Oracy Project, in which they issued a small number of grants to Local Education Authorities to support the teaching of oral communication and develop 'methods of assessment of and through speech' (Johnson, 1994, 33). The 2014 National Curriculum now states that students 'should be taught to speak clearly and

convey ideas confidently using standard English', which includes justifying their ideas, questioning, negotiating, and selecting the appropriate register (DfE, 2014, section 6.2). The premise is that these skills 'will enable them to clarify their thinking as well as organise their ideas for writing' (DfE, 2014, section 6.2), although there is no mention of the benefits of oral communication as an end in itself. Despite its presence on the curriculum, however, 'support for oracy across [...] lessons, classrooms and schools' remains 'patchy' (Millard and Menzies, 2016).

Nevertheless, a vast amount of research has been published since the 1990s on the wide-ranging benefits of oracy education, which includes the teaching of presentational public speaking, debating, working effectively in a group, instructing others, and listening (Mercer *et al.*, 2019, 293). Mannion, writing for Oracy Cambridge,¹ streamlines these skills into two broader categories: learning to talk (oracy education) and learning through talk (dialogic approaches to teaching and learning) (Mannion, 2020). Like Wilkinson, Howe relegates oral repetition in favour of developing students' use of their natural vernacular 'as part of the learning process' (Howe, 1994, 46): more precisely, supporting their use of language as a tool to grapple with new concepts and patterns of thinking and feeling, as well as the development of students' learner identities and autonomy. In other words, oracy education does not aim to apprentice students into a particular way of speaking, but to equip them with the skills necessary to form and present an argument, to participate in effective dialogue, and to express themselves across a range of contexts.

There have been several studies (reviewed in Mannion, 2020) that illustrate the positive impact of oracy education on students' educational outcomes. However, the rate at which students' oracy develops depends on their environments and identities (Mercer *et al.*, 2019, 294). Gender, for example, is a key factor impacting oracy: Hunter *et al.* (2005) found that oral production in male groups lags significantly behind that of all-female groups. Additionally, children from lower-income backgrounds are less likely to have had a rich talk experience at home, and may consequently possess a more limited vocabulary or awareness of how to communicate across different contexts (Hart and Risley, 1995); additionally, some students may feel alienated by school culture, which traditionally 'reflects many of the social and linguistic norms of the professional middle class' (Mercer *et al.*, 2019, 297). Furthermore, oracy skills are rarely prioritised in the state sector: according to the National Literacy Trust, the average number of words uttered per child per lesson is just four in the most economically disadvantaged inner-city schools (Kellaway, 2023). However, Mercer *et al.*, do not suggest any strategies for how to account for a range of levels of oracy in the classroom. A stance that emerges frequently from the literature is that, in order to mitigate the impact of some of these barriers, oracy skills must be explicitly taught: Howe warns against leaving oracy 'solely to chance' or providing pupils with 'vague, unfocused instructions, purposes and outcomes' (Howe, 1994, 52). Mannion (2020) goes further and asserts the need for dedicated oracy lessons, arguing that an embedded approach to oracy – in which subject teachers simply incorporate opportunities for spoken language into their lessons – is inefficient at secondary level. Within this project, it will be necessary to adapt my lessons in order to meet the full range of needs and experience.

Cooperative learning

One key strand of oracy research focuses on how learning is facilitated through social interaction. Building on the constructivist work of Vygotsky (1978), Mercer *et al.*, posit that 'language has

three crucial, integrated functions': as a cognitive tool, a social or cultural tool, and a pedagogic tool (Mercer *et al.*, 1999, 6). Firstly, students in the group may employ language as a cognitive tool to 'think through' or articulate ideas: recent research in neuroscience and psychology supports the view that the process of 'interthinking', or collective reasoning, is facilitated through language (Mercer *et al.*, 2019, 293). Secondly, students may use language as a pedagogic tool to explain a concept to their peers (a process that requires a greater degree of explicitness than collaborative talk): as illustrated by the Vygotskian concept of the 'zone of proximal development', students extend their understanding through interaction with a 'more able other' (Johnson *et al.*, 2014). Finally, students may exercise the social-cultural function of language to share their own experiences and knowledge, enabling others to develop their cultural awareness and empathy (Hermitage and Harrison, 2020, 55). In addition, cooperative learning, particularly when structured and guided by the interventions of a teacher, can aid the development of student 'self-regulation' (Hattie, 2012, 118), as using discussion to question ideas, solve problems or justify arguments encourages students to reflect on their thinking process (Speers, 2020, 20). To scaffold this process, teachers should incorporate dedicated time within lessons for students to reflect on the processes and dynamics of the group.

Student reasoning and argumentation

My investigation will focus on learning through talk: in particular, how students might develop their higher-order historical thinking skills through 'exploratory talk', in which 'partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas', and where 'knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible in the talk' (Mercer *et al.*, 1999, 97). During exploratory talk, both teachers and students have access to students' thought processes and can therefore challenge or guide them at specific points during this process. Several studies have shown that students who are explicitly taught the conventions of exploratory talk (such as how to make hypotheses and justify them, how to offer challenges and counter-challenges) exhibit material improvements in both their individual and collective reasoning skills (Mercer *et al.*, 1999, 107). Furthermore, in a study conducted with university students, Musselman found that 'by independently discussing interpretations with other class members, students come to see themselves as co-producers of a historical knowledge that is never final' (Musselman, 2004, 336). By asking students to take a position and justify that position, students are also given a stake in the historical process and may consider themselves participants in the discipline.

Further exploring this idea, Zohar and Nemet (2002) argue that the application of higher-order skills such as argumentation and enquiry should not be introduced only after the 'mastery' of prerequisite skills: rather, retention and understanding are consolidated by 'learning experiences in which learners are active thinkers about what they are learning' (Zohar and Nemet 2002, 36). In other words, under the right conditions, subject content and disciplinary skills may develop in tandem with oracy. In contrast, VanSledright (2002) argues that it is necessary for students to have a strong grasp of the historical content before asking them to consider a specific perspective. My view aligns most closely with that of Lee (2006), who maintains that students must be taught disciplinary language and vocabulary in order that they might comment on and add to one another's ideas. Throughout my lesson sequence, discussion will be used to consolidate and contextualise the learning of new concepts and vocabulary.

Historical empathy

An important factor in enhancing historical thinking and argumentation is the development of ‘historical empathy’. Jensen (2008) quotes Downey’s (1995) definition of historical empathy as ‘the ability to recognize how the past was different from the present, distinguish between multiple perspectives from the past, explain their analysis of the author’s perspective, and defend it with historical evidence’ (Jensen, 2008, 56). Like listening and argumentation, ‘the ability to perspective take is a cognitive skill that must be taught and practised, not a show of human emotion’ (Jensen, 2008, 56; see also see Kohlmeier, 2006). As a ‘cognitive skill, perspective taking can develop students’ capacity for ‘doing’ History by forcing them to consider the way historical events and practices benefited some people but not others; to recognise the contested nature of sources and how their meaning changes depending on the contexts of their production and reception, and to identify the people and issues excluded from historical metanarratives. Moreover, it is important for students to recognise that domains with a ‘horizontal knowledge structure’, such as History, ‘do not have a single correct answer, but [...] have several reasonable possibilities, depending on the perspective taken’ (Havekes *et al.*, 2017, 71). Historical empathy may be supported through learning experiences such as debates, in which students have to not only make an argument, but also anticipate possible counterarguments.

Assessment for learning

Johnson draws a distinction between two kinds of oral assessment: ‘assessment of talk’ and ‘assessment through talk’ (Johnson, 1994, 41). It is the latter concept which will be most relevant to this project. Participants in the National Oracy Project found that shifting the focus from literacy to oracy enabled teachers to gain a fuller assessment of what students ‘know, understand, and can do’, by giving them ‘much fuller access to the processes of learning, not just the final outcomes’ (Johnson, 1994, 41). Oracy, in other words, is a central component of the sort of classroom-based assessment promoted by the Assessment Reform Group (ARG), which takes into account ‘a range of types of evidence of pupils’ learning’ (ARG, 2006, 13), such as problem-solving, collaborative working, and engagement: the kind of rich data which written assessments are ill-equipped to measure (Harrison and Kranat, 2023).

Moreover, spoken language offers students the opportunity to exhibit their understanding in a more spontaneous and informal setting (i.e. to an internal, familiar audience, and without a paper trail), and allows teachers to correct misconceptions as they occur. This element of oracy is closely related to Alexander’s work on dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2008, 2018), a formative strategy which is often considered a central process of Assessment for Learning. Yet unlike oracy, dialogic teaching is a pedagogic concept rather than a curricular one (Mercer *et al.*, 2019, 295). Dialogic teaching may be used as a framework to facilitate the integrated concepts of ‘learning through talk’ and ‘assessment through talk’, and literature on dialogic teaching sheds light on how teachers might effectively facilitate and regulate classroom talk (e.g. Marshall, 2022). However, researchers also highlight some of the challenges of assessing understanding through talk: in speech, people ‘do not always make their knowledge explicit (like an iceberg, the greater proportion remains hidden)’ (Johnson, 1994, 41); in addition, the ephemeral nature of spoken interaction, as well as the collaborative nature of most oral tasks, make it difficult to assess

individual performances (Mercer *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, my hope is to draw the focus away from individual performances towards cumulative dialogue.

Summary

Oracy has been and continues to be undervalued as a learning and assessment process. However, oracy education can support students’ social, academic, and emotional development, as well as their reasoning and argumentation skills and historical empathy. Discussion has been shown to aid students’ understanding and retention of key concepts at every stage in the learning process, and may provide students with informal opportunities to take more risks. Spoken language may also offer an inclusive and group-focused method of assessing learning.

Lesson planning

The lesson sequence was designed to support the following learning outcomes:

- Students are able to imagine a range of historical perspectives on the gladiatorial games and argue effectively on both sides of an argument;
- Students are able to offer their own opinions and justify them orally;
- Students are able to listen and respond directly to one another’s arguments.

The sequence consisted of four 50-minute lessons on the Roman gladiatorial games, loosely based around Stage 8 (*gladiatores*) of Book 1 of the *Cambridge Latin Course* (CSCP, 1998) [See Supplementary Appendix A]. The sequence culminated in a class debate: ‘The violence of the gladiatorial games was justifiable for entertainment purposes.’

Activities in the first two lessons were designed to get students thinking about whether different historical demographics did or did not benefit from the gladiatorial games, and to support their understanding and evaluation of some literary and visual sources [Supplementary Appendices B, C, D]. In the third lesson, students planned their arguments for the debate in groups of four, where four groups were arguing in favour of the motion and four groups were arguing against it [Supplementary Appendices E, F]. The debate took place in the final lesson and was followed by an opportunity for guided, independent reflection [Supplementary Appendices G, H].

There were some specific challenges associated with facilitating discussion within a Year 7 class of 31 students. To account for the fact that not all students would feel confident speaking in public, there were opportunities for participation in both exploratory talk (during group discussion tasks) and presentational talk (in the form of both speeches and spontaneous discussion during the debate). In order to manage the large class during the debate, students were asked to put their hand up when they wanted to make a point. To ensure that students did not lose focus or get overlooked during group tasks, discussion generally took place in pairs or threes, and I ensured that all group activities were purposeful, time-limited, and structured around an enquiry question (Johnson, 1994, 39). Moreover, Day recommends supporting discussion in Key Stage 3 with a range of ‘kinaesthetic activities that enable an engagement with the material’ (Day, 2019, 7), so I incorporated activities such as ranking activities and comparisons [Supplementary Appendices B, D]. Within each group each student had a clearly defined role in the planning

process: an adaptive strategy which not only helps to prevent conflict but also ensures ‘positive interdependence as well as individual accountability’ (Brame and Biel, 2015).

Additionally, it can be difficult engaging students like Obelix and Dogmatix, who are not necessarily going to take the language to GCSE,² in debates about Roman civilisation. Zohar and Nemet (2002) advise motivating students by choosing an engaging topic for argumentation. Based on students’ general enthusiasm for discussing different types of gladiators, I decided that the gladiatorial games – a phenomenon which incorporates elements of modern spectator sports and some video games popular among the group – was a topic well-suited to this class.

To assess students’ learning and oracy skills, I employed a range of methods of data collection: the conversations I overheard or participated in as I circulated, completed worksheets from the perspectives activity, debate plans, written speeches [Appendix H], and the notes I made on individual students’ contributions during the debate.

Lesson evaluation and analysis of findings

Historical thinking skills

Throughout the sequence I observed some marked developments in students’ ability to imagine a range of historical perspectives: a skill which was practised primarily through two activities. In the first lesson, I assigned students in groups of two or three a historical *persona* [Supplementary Appendix C], and asked them to consider how their *persona* did and did not benefit from the gladiatorial games. Each group was able to come up with at least one argument either side, and many students made some imaginative historical conjectures: one group argued that freedwomen would not have enjoyed having to occupy the cheap seats at the arena, and another suggested that gladiator trainers might be at risk of ‘Revenge taking students’ (dangerous!). These conjectures indicated a deep engagement with the task, as students were clearly considering the social, economic and emotional implications – direct and indirect – of each role. In the second lesson, I asked students to discuss in pairs who does and doesn’t benefit from a modern form of public entertainment of their choice: unprompted, they were able to recognise the variety of stakeholders in, say, professional football, such as players, fans, and companies who use their kits for advertising. At the start of the sequence, the class voted overwhelmingly in favour of the motion, employing justifications that mainly focused on the perspective of the spectators (as Cacophonix pointed out, ‘They didn’t have video games!’). At the end of the sequence, however, the majority of students voted against the motion [Supplementary Appendix A]. This change supports Kohlmeier (2006) and Jensen (2008), who argue that students’ historical empathy and ability to critique historical assumptions are improved when they engage with a topic through discussion.

Another key aim of the unit was to determine whether, through exploratory talk, students might become more fluent at giving developed answers using ‘because’ or ‘agree’ (Mercer *et al.*, 1999, 105). To assist with the *personae* activity, I handed out a ‘source sheet’ with a selection of differing accounts of the games. The aim was to demonstrate that history consists of multiple, often opposing, narratives (Havekes *et al.*, 2017, 84), and to prompt them to consider, at a metacognitive level, what makes an effective argument. I overheard several conversations which indicated that students were engaging in ‘collective reasoning’. One pair were discussing whether Augustus’ assertion that 3,500 beasts were

killed during the games he sponsored was a boast, or whether he was describing this as a great loss. Between them, they came to the conclusion that Augustus was boasting about his importation of exotic animals into Rome to demonstrate his commitment to popular entertainment, though in modern times we understand this as a loss. From looking at their worksheets, I saw that many students were able to form arguments using evidence from the sources (e.g. ‘If they defeated the animal, they would gain popularity and become a celebrity towards the spectators’), but rarely specified their source (a Roman cup depicting two well-known gladiators). In the third lesson, therefore, I provided a specific box for evidence on the debate planning worksheet. As a result, a number of students incorporated specific evidence from the sources into their speeches:

Emperor Augustus directly stated that he ‘celebrated games’ under his and his sons’/grandsons’ names, meaning that the gladiator shows sometimes were actively in celebration of something. They were also held in honour of someone who died recently, proving that they also became part of Roman culture.

In addition, it became clear that students were more confident engaging in higher-level thinking when they were first given an opportunity to discuss the question with a partner: an idea that emerges frequently from Assessment for Learning literature on effective questioning (Black *et al.*, 2004, 12). In the first lesson, I asked the class whether they agreed with the senator Regulus’ decision in the story *in arena* in Stage 8 of the *Cambridge Latin Course* (CSCP, 1998) to put the *murmillones* to death. Asterix and Vitalstatix, who started the sequence with a lot of prior historical knowledge about Roman civilisation, were very keen to spontaneously share their ideas, whereas Obelix, Dogmatix and Getafix did not volunteer any answers. In the second lesson, we evaluated two sources provided in the *Cambridge Latin Course* (CSCP, 1998, p. 111) relating to the riot at the gladiatorial games in Pompeii in 59 CE. These sources were of a more manageable length, and we looked over them as a class. In pairs, students then chose one out of the three questions on the board to discuss [Supplementary Appendix A]. Not only were students able to engage with these sources more effectively than those in the previous lesson, but, in response to my feedback, they were now able to pick out and analyse specific parts of the source, such as the Latin in the wall painting. Almost every pair put their hands up to volunteer their answer. As argued by Zohar *et al.*, the application of ‘active thinking’ through discussion, particularly at this early stage in the learning process, increased the ‘complexity and richness’ of student discourse (Zohar and Nemet, 2002, 36).

Unfortunately, it was difficult during this activity to motivate Dogmatix to have a discussion with his partner. His reluctance to engage in the discussion task could have been for any number of reasons relating to the time of day, his relationship with his partner, or the nature of the questions. Clearly, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting students’ oracy: a fact which highlights the necessity for a range of activities to account for different learning styles and, frequently, the intervention of a teacher to facilitate student dialogue.

During the debate, I was impressed to find that many students were able to appreciate the distinction between ancient and modern perspectives, which Jensen (2008) argues can be cognitively challenging for younger pupils. As one student wrote in his speech:

In the context of the time killing animals wasn't considered wrong because it was viewed as entertainment. The ancient Romans saw it as a form of amusement and as a demonstration of power unlike how cruelty to animals is shown today.

However, the debate became very heated when Vitalstatistix suggested that slavery was an accepted part of life in the Roman world, and Cacophonix accused him of arguing that 'slavery was okay'. I should have anticipated that this distinction would be more problematic when dealing with highly sensitive topics like the history of enslavement. However, the fact that students were independently able to connect the gladiatorial games to the wider phenomenon of slavery in the ancient world was evidence of some fairly sophisticated historical thinking (Havekes *et al.*, 2017, 81).

Oracy skills

In the first lesson the class put together some 'ground rules' for group work, which Mercer *et al.*, argue is important in order for them to 'feel some 'ownership' and responsibility for adherence to them' (Mercer *et al.*, 1999, 100). In the third lesson, I introduced the concept of oracy (which some students recalled from primary school). We discussed some examples of effective collaborative conversation, which Mercer *et al.* (2019) recommend in order that students are active partners in the creation of learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Students were able to recall that they shouldn't speak over other people and could model what 'good listening' looks like. However, at several points their procedural knowledge of these social skills was not as practised as their declarative knowledge, particularly when they got excited during an argument. It might have been more effective to refer back to these rules in later lessons (or have them displayed in the classroom), rather than issuing my own instructions later.

The desired outcome of the final two lessons was that every student would contribute to at least one stage of the planning and debating process. After some less successful instances of collaborative work in the first two lessons – for example, some pairs voicing reluctance to work together – I decided to rearrange the tables for the final two lessons in order to facilitate effective cooperative learning. In the third lesson, I put students into groups of four (with supportive groupings based around Special Educational Needs and Disabilities needs and confidence with oracy) and rearranged the classroom so that each group was sitting together around one table. Within these groups, each student was given a role: 'researchers', 'counter-arguers', and 'speech-makers', who were responsible for coming up with persuasive rhetorical techniques. The purpose of assigning a 'speech-maker' was to raise students' awareness of how to communicate across different contexts (Mercer *et al.*, 2019). Students exhibited a good awareness of the kinds of rhetorical techniques specific to 'presentational talk'. Note the paratactic sentence and rhetorical question in the example below:

They were bred in captivity, only to die the next day. Do these poor creatures have no life?

This activity was successful insofar as most students managed to fill in the planning worksheet, and the more considered groupings and designated tasks contributed to much wider participation. As one student reflected afterwards: 'Not everyone got a chance [to speak during the debate] but they still contributed to the words'. At the end of the lesson, I reshuffled the class so that students could compare their ideas with one member of each of the other groups

on their side of the debate (a strategy taken from Johnson 1994). For this final stage, each student was individually responsible for sharing their own group's ideas with the other three students, meaning that everyone had to contribute. In two groups, students exhibited effective listening by systematically sharing their ideas in turn. At this point groups could have fed back their ideas to the class, which would have given me the opportunity to publicly 'problematised' their arguments and offer some feedback before they went away and worked on their speeches.

One key consideration of this exercise was that there would be several students who did not feel confident presenting ideas in front of the whole class. Before the final lesson, I asked everyone to synthesise their ideas into a half-page speech arguing for their side of the debate, and to prepare rebuttals to two possible counter-arguments. I then chose the two best speeches from each side to be read out as opening and closing speeches during the debate. This meant that every student was theoretically prepared to be a speaker or a questioner, and had practised the skill of 'oral composition', the aspect of oracy connected to giving students 'power over language' to articulate and communicate their ideas effectively (Howe, 1994, 44). As Jensen (2008) anticipated, this also worked well as an adaptive strategy. For example, one group subtly indicated on their speeches that they were keen to present: '**PLEASE PICK US WE WON'T DISAPPOINT!!!!** 🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏', whereas Asterix wrote that, 'I don't like performing by myself, so if mine is picked I would like for the whole group to be doing it with me'. Everyone except five students in the class contributed verbally – either by reading their speech or offering a counter-argument – to the debate, which I judged to be a successful outcome: on average there are only around ten students who voluntarily give answers during lessons. Despite his reticence, Asterix went on to volunteer a counter-argument to the other team's opening speech (as did Cacophonix), and Vitalstatistix and Getafix were both chosen to read their speeches. Unfortunately, Obelix and Dogmatix were absent on the day of the debate.

One of the aims of the sequence was to work towards a more 'cumulative' dialogic environment. Prior to the lesson sequence, I noticed that students like Vitalstatistix were often keen to offer an opinion, but weren't necessarily listening or responding to other students' answers. Moreover, the traditional model of teacher questioning encourages 'disputational' dialogue, in which 'multiple ideas are brought forward but... these answers remain autonomous and are not related to each other' (Havekes *et al.*, 2017, 82). During discussion, the most successful students are rather those who 'listen carefully to their classmates, respond directly to others' points, and draw other students into the discussion' (Musselman, 2004, 340). However, in order to manage the 31 students and so that individuals did not dominate the discussion, I insisted that students could only speak during the debate when I had called on them. One student fed back:

I did not enjoy the fact we could not chain argue. It made expressing our views of the debate hard and many of the flawed arguments from our opposition were left without a counter-argument.

In order to tighten the focus of the discussion I could, perhaps, have implemented a rule where everybody had to put their hands down while others were speaking, and then given them a few seconds' thinking time before asking for a response from the opposition. Another student wrote:

We could've gone round the room instead of choosing at random so everyone could have a go.

This was a particularly perceptive piece of feedback: if I had chosen students systematically, then everyone would have had to contribute. However, it might also have detracted from the organic nature of the discussion, and some students would have been disappointed if they hadn't been able to respond spontaneously to an argument. Nevertheless, the digression into the topic of slavery was the result of effective cumulative discussion.

Finally, I wanted to find out how effectively I could assess students' understanding of the topic through these oracy-focused activities: in other words, how far discussion and debate facilitated Assessment for Learning processes. As Howe (1994) suggests, I kept a high profile during the planning stage, 'listening in, joining in, pushing, encouraging, so that everyone [felt] observed' and I could offer immediate feedback (Howe, 1994, 53). Due to the informal nature of the discussion, I found that misunderstandings were revealed which might not have come up in written or independent tasks (Jensen, 2008), such as the idea that 'all slaves in ancient Rome were from Africa'. I was also listening out for evidence of linguistic features associated with exploratory talk such as 'because', 'I think' and 'agree' (Mercer *et al.*, 1999), which offered an insight into students' ability to cooperate and constructively engage with each other's ideas: skills not generally assessed in external, summative exams, but significant educational outcomes nonetheless (Harrison and Kranat, 2023). However, my data is limited by the fact that I did not prepare a systematic, quantitative way of recording these linguistic features, as used in Zohar and Nemet (2002) and Havekes *et al.* (2017), and was therefore unable to measure it against data collected at the start of the sequence. Naturally, as there were often eight or more groups working simultaneously, I was also unable to assess each individual. Although I provided planning worksheets where groups could synthesise their ideas, 'collective reasoning' is a learning process which is by its nature ephemeral.

The debate, conversely, offered a suitable setting in which to observe students' 'presentational talk', as well as their ability to spontaneously select and communicate the relevant information. Student reflections at the end of the sequence indicated that they had largely understood the learning criteria and were able to assess the quality of their own participation accordingly. For example:

We should have avoided personal comments.

Unfortunately, the most comprehensive way of assessing students' historical thinking and substantive knowledge (through their use of primary accounts and topic-specific vocabulary) was through the written speeches they prepared. Nevertheless, these speeches clearly offered evidence of skills that students had honed primarily through oral tasks.

Conclusion

This project offered a number of opportunities to consider how students might become active and cooperative learners in the Classics classroom, and how oracy may be applied as a learning process as well as an outcome in itself. The lessons were largely student-led, yet by engaging in the 'social construction of knowledge' (Zohar and Nemet, 2002, 57), students managed to reach convincing conclusions to some complex historical questions. Through a range of purposeful, oracy-centred tasks, students demonstrated improvements in their historical empathy and were able to recognise a range of distinct historical perspectives.

Moreover, students' confidence in expressing a judgement or evaluation was generally improved when they had first had a chance to discuss their ideas with a partner. As the topic of the gladiatorial games was introduced from the start as a historical phenomenon constructed via often oppositional narratives, most students felt comfortable participating and articulating their own historical judgements.

In particular, students enjoyed preparing for and participating in the debate. Although there was less evidence of their awareness of multiple perspectives in the debate itself (beyond that of the gladiators themselves), most students demonstrated an ability to listen and respond directly to one another's arguments. Significantly, arguments were pursued in the debate that had not been previously discussed during class time, demonstrating possibilities of cumulative dialogue within structured argumentation.

I was pleased to find that the prospect of an exciting planned activity seemed to motivate students, as it made the activities in prior lessons seem purposeful, and they enjoyed the deviation from the customary lesson structure. It was also helpful for me to have planned where the learning will go several lessons in advance, and to consider learning outcomes in terms of procedural rather than substantive knowledge. I found that as their substantive knowledge improved, their ability to integrate these two forms of knowing also improved. Introducing opportunities for problematisation and evaluation and connecting the lesson content to the modern world early on the learning helped students to actively engage immediately with the topic.

If I were to run another class debate, I would spend more time on the conventions of 'presentational talk', as most of the oracy education within this sequence was centred around 'exploratory talk': a skill that is more rarely taught explicitly. Although everybody in the class wrote a speech, only four people got to deliver them during the debate: in another lesson, we could have gone through some of the distinct features of effective public delivery, to deepen their understanding of how language might be employed differently within different contexts. I also could have connected this topic more explicitly to overarching historical concepts, such as Roman entertainment or enslavement.

One challenge with which I was confronted throughout the sequence was the question of whether or not students should take notes during oral activities. I did not want the additional step of writing things down to detract from the discussion, yet there were times when it was necessary for students to make a record of their conversation in order to preserve their ideas for the next lesson, or so that I could see some evidence of their work. I could have made better use of student Chromebooks and asked them to complete their worksheets on a collaborative Google Doc, so that everyone would have been able to see their own and other groups' ideas. In this case, students in each group could have taken turns to be the scribe.

As the teacher, I would have liked to focus more on 'problematising' their arguments: in other words, offering 'divergent prompts' to demonstrate how a range of reasonable answers may 'challenge each other without necessarily leading to a single correct answer' (Havekes *et al.*, 2017, 74). In domains such as history, it can be productive for the teacher to not merely accept students' arguments as they are presented, but to introduce multiple possibilities and to guide students to think about the quality of their answers. Future work might also consider how to extend students' analysis and appreciation of diverse perspectives by more explicitly contextualising the historical accounts.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631024001041>.

Notes

1 Oracy Cambridge is an organisation set up to raise awareness of the importance of effective communication in schools and workplaces and to share relevant research between policy makers and practitioners.

2 GCSE is an examination qualification in several subjects, taken by students aged 16.

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