Dialogue, engagement and generative interaction in the history classroom

Michael Bird has a long-standing interest in the power of classroom dialogue, not only as a means of eliciting students' prior knowledge or checking their understanding of new ideas and information, but also as a powerful tool for generating new knowledge through a collective process of meaning-making. In this article, he first uses two extracts of classroom dialogue to illustrate the kinds of generative interactions that can be stimulated by carefully planned question sequences and then shares an approach to planning such sequences that has been adopted and successfully shared with student-teachers within the PGCE programme that he leads.

Michael Bird
Michael Bird is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Chester, and Head of Initial Teacher Education.

Allow me to share an anecdote from a conversation with Tim, a ten-year old pupil in May 2021, just after the second extended period of school closures, in response to Covid, had ended. Asked whether he had seen any benefits of being in lockdown and missing so much school, he scratched his head, pondered for a while and resolutely stated 'No!' The conversation continued:

Adult: *what do you mean 'No!'? Was there really nothing?*
Tim: *Yes – really nothing. I hated it.*
Adult: *Why was it so bad?*
Tim: *[pauses] I just lost so much, well, you know [pauses again] power and I can't seem to get it back. You know that kind of power which lets you get really noticed, plus I hated talking to my friends on Zoom.*

The adult speaking to Tim tried to clarify what he meant by 'power'. It seemed an odd word to use. As the adult pointed out, Tim had grown considerably in strength and size since March 2020. It was only much later, after several further dialogues, that the adult worked out what lay behind Tim's notion of 'power'. He was a keen video gamer and was referring to the 'power' that might be visually represented for each character by a 'stamina bar', which shows how their reserves are depleted each time they carry out particular feats, creating a need for some kind of refuelling. This was the best way Tim could find to encapsulate his feeling, making a metaphorical reference to characters' stamina within the video games with which he was so familiar. He had made a connection, a bridge between his prior knowledge and his experience in the here and now, that was inspired by the adult's question. This particular example reminds teachers that our learners' prior knowledge encompasses whatever existing information, ideas and understanding they have at their disposal in order to make sense of new knowledge and experiences. In this instance, both Tim and the adult benefited from the dialogue. Tim was able to articulate how he felt, in a way that made sense to him; the adult was able to develop an understanding of Tim's feelings. This is an example of generative interaction, where dialogue builds upon each participant's existing knowledge and understanding and in so doing creates new meaning.

I have cited this example to illustrate some simple but fundamental maxims about the importance of dialogue in all aspects of human relations, including learning and teaching. Dialogue is a broad term which not only encompasses the process in which we talk, listen and get to know each other better, but also the process by which we share, reflect, empathise, understand and construct meaning. Dialogue is simultaneously both a social and cognitive process. The ramifications of this claim are significant, for it broadens the meaning of learning beyond changing an *individual's* long-term memory and recognises the *collective* transformations to understanding and practice that we can see happening as a consequence of learning. Dialogue is not only the means by which we share our knowledge and understanding – in other words we learn *through* dialogue – it is also how we inflect knowledge with new meanings, constructed *within* the dialogue. The process includes an important tacit dimension: much of what we say in dialogue in response to what we hear requires fractional and intuitive judgement. Where we can see this judgement in action within dialogue, the knowledge on which it rests manifests itself indirectly, for it is not possible to articulate fully and is highly context-specific.[1]

Figure 1: Dialogue with a Year 7 focusing on the facsimile of Domesday Entries in Figure 2

The pupils were from a comprehensive school local to the areas in this record. The teacher was trying to get pupils not to be put off by things they can't read and to understand that it is really important whatever the source material to study it as closely as possible as though it were an object or picture.

Teacher: As I said this is actually a document from the Domesday survey for the local area. This is the first time, probably, that the names of the places we live in have actually been written about and it dates to 1086. Nearly 1000 years ago… isn't that amazing…!

Paula: But it's weird. What's it saying?

Jack: Stuff.

Ben: Are we supposed to work it out?

[pause]

Teacher: Look out for anything you might recognise… No… there's no way you can work out what it is saying yet. Jack, you look puzzled?

Jack: So what are we doing this for then? I don't know… I don't get it.

Shola: Is it in English?

Teacher: Can you see any English?

Shola: No…

Alex: Is it in Latin?

Teacher: Brilliant Alex!! Where have we come across Latin being used before in this topic?

Matthew: Bayeux tapestry.

Teacher: Yes absolutely… And yet you worked out some of the words… Remember William, Harold and Edward were all mentioned?

James: How did they write it?

Shola: Some of the words are crossed out? Are they mistakes?

Teacher: Sometimes people score through words for different reasons don't they? [holds up a highlighter pen]

Girl: They might have been highlighted…?

Teacher: Why don't you focus on the top crossed out word and see if you can recognise it?

[pupils read out the letters as far as they can; teacher writes 'Turstantone' on the board]

Several pupils: Thurstaston?

Paula: Is it Thurstaston?

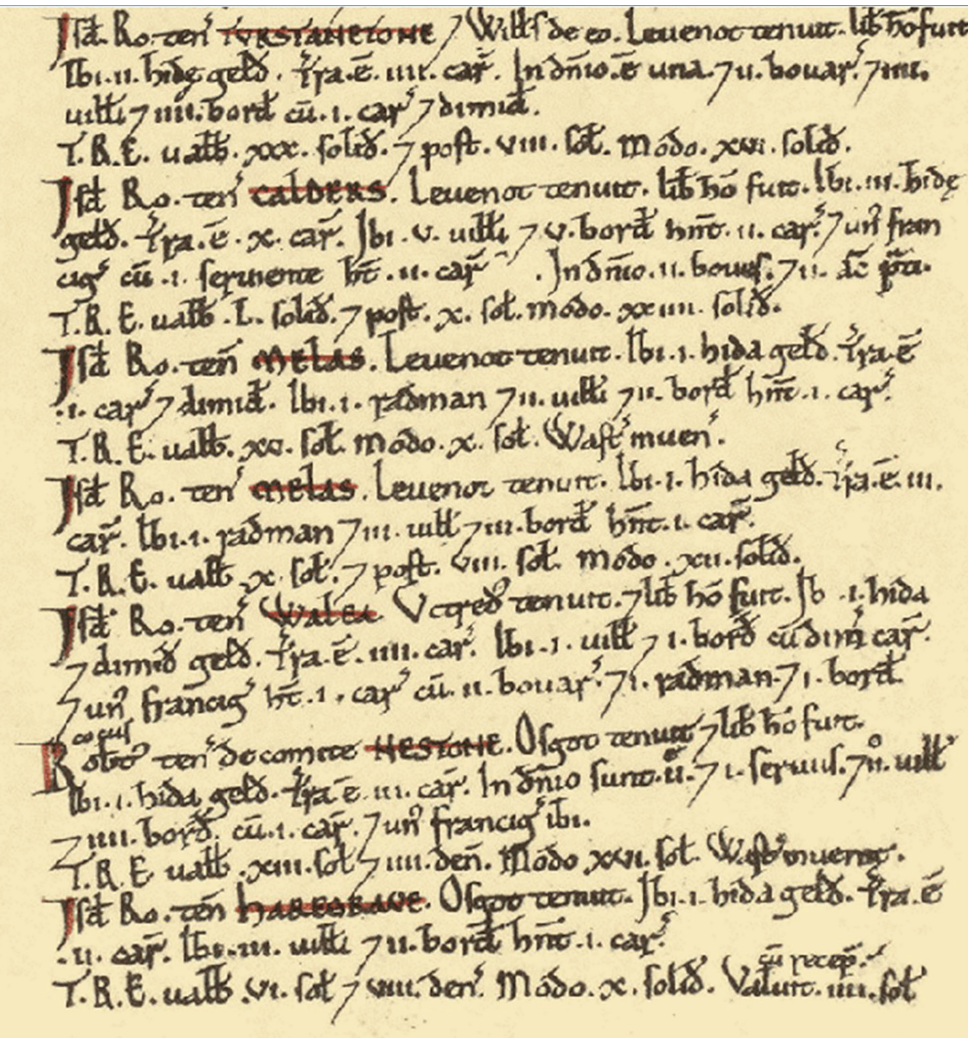
Teacher: Well done! Absolutely. Now what might the crossed out words be then now that we have worked out this one?

Several pupils: Places?

Teacher: Can you try and work out the other ones then?

[frenzied activity]

Figure 2: Facsimile copy of Domesday entries for Wirral manors



Making pedagogically sound, judicious judgements within dialogue with learners is therefore an act of knowing in itself and of knowing more than we can say.[2] Dialogic teaching is not a different or new approach; we would argue that some type of dialogue is a feature in all forms of learning. However, if we are to develop our practice and enhance our use of dialogue in our lessons, then we need to consider further why we are using dialogue, what type of dialogue we are using and how it is being used.

Dialogue within history: fundamental but threatened?

Within history classes, using dialogue in teaching is surely central. As Carr reminds us, 'history is continuous dialogue between the present and the past'.[3] In any democratic society, dialogue is the means by which society communicates, shapes and debates its understanding of the past and it is at the core of the discipline.[4] It is only through open dialogue that claims, stories and arguments about history are tested, accepted, modified, or rejected and that prejudice, zealotry, conspiracy and dogma are uncovered. It is impossible to imagine these processes running counter to the aims of history teaching.

Nevertheless, it is also the case that history teachers are under pressures that can relegate the perceived value of dialogue within the teaching of history. Among these pressures are, for example, constraints to curriculum time which can encourage teaching to be made up of content cramming and examination question practice.[5] There has also been, over the past decade or more, a 'knowledge turn' in the discourse of history education which has re-emphasised the place of substantive knowledge within school curriculum design.[6] Rather than see this as a rich opportunity to re-think school history radically, and with dialogue as an important part, the knowledge turn has led some to argue for a return to 'a traditional education, with children sitting in rows, learning the kings and queens of England' and to present history as a received subject, with little room for dialogue.[7] Furthermore, inviting pupils to contribute freely to questions posed as part of a dialogue is inherently unpredictable, and impossible to control completely. It comes with risks of going 'wrong'. For teachers who value control over anything else in classroom practice, this will inevitably be off-putting.

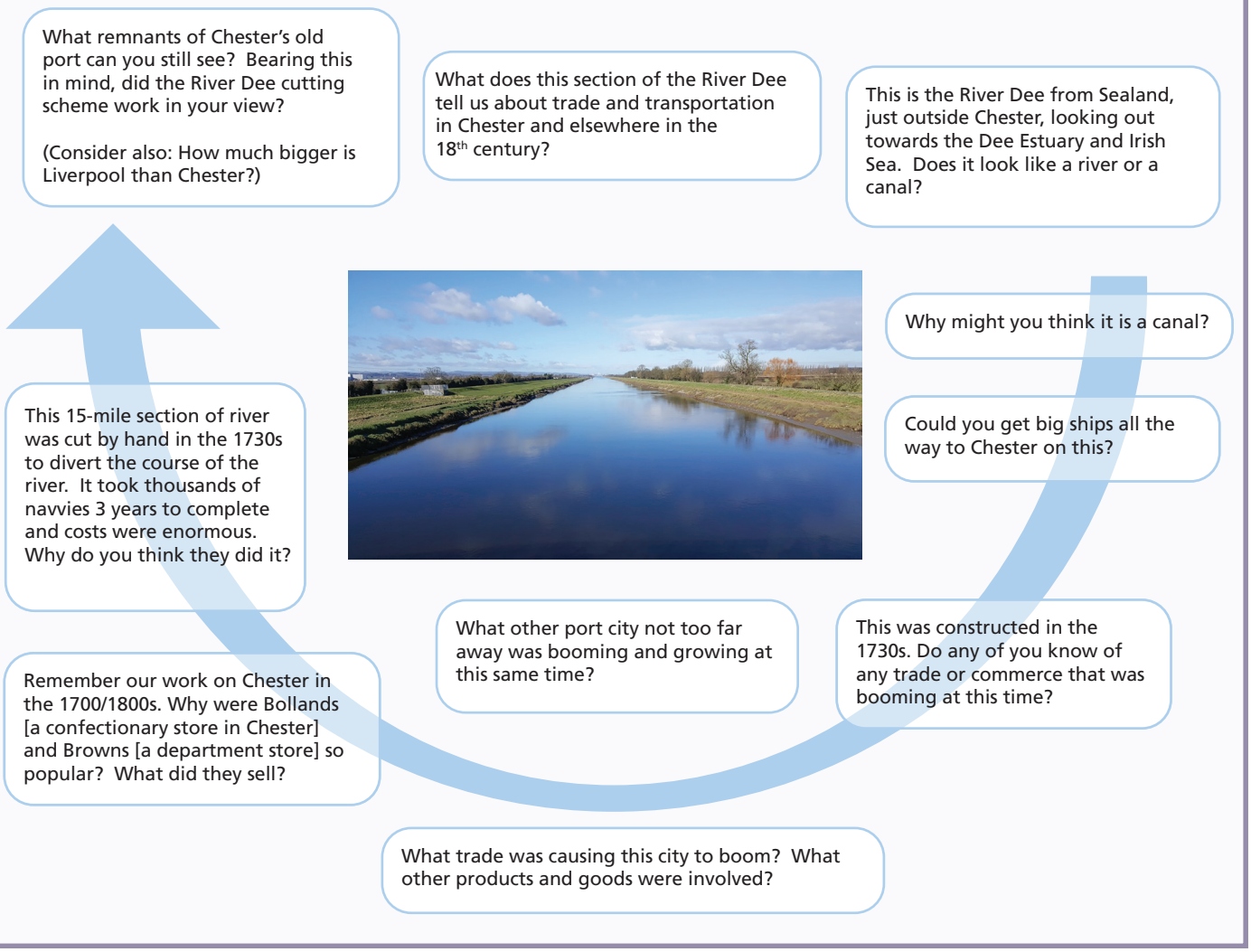
Dialogue within history: common but understudied

Despite these points, and many others, which may encourage practitioners to marginalise the place of dialogue in history teaching, our own research and work within many history classrooms suggests that dialogue is a common and everyday classroom activity that is valued by history teachers. Nonetheless, it remains understudied. In Ofsted's recent research review, the authors state that 'the study of history can bring pupils into a rich dialogue with the past and with traditions of historical enquiry'.[8] They omit to state, however, in what ways this dialogue is important or how it can be used. This omission reflects a general shortage of studies focused on dialogue in history classrooms that seek to understand its function in developing historical understanding.[9] My purpose in this article is to address this shortage and bring the role of dialogue, engagement and generative interaction in history learning to greater prominence in the discussions of history teachers and history education in general.

In an earlier article, written with Thomas Wilson, I explored the use of dialogue within the teaching of a series of lessons about the Norman legacy on the City of Chester. In that argument we proposed that pupils engaged, alongside the teacher, in a dialogue which enriched knowledge immeasurably and served to create new meanings in a dynamic interaction of tacit and explicit forms of knowledge held collectively and individually.[10] Using excerpts of dialogue accumulated from other research projects in local schools within the University of Chester initial teacher education partnership, I present some additional short excerpts of authentic classroom dialogue in order to further illustrate this argument. Drawing from these excerpts and the wisdom of the practitioners involved, I set out some recommendations for practitioners who wish to enhance their use of dialogue.

Figure 3: Planned and potential sequence of questions to ask in relation to a picture of the River Dee cutting

The questions, which were designed by a trainee teacher, are sequenced in a clockwise fashion, starting from the statement 'This is the River Dee…' in the one o'clock position. They represent the teacher's planning of a dialogue that would pull together the knowledge necessary to help the children to answer the final question (in the 12 o'clock position).



Dialogue to access stimulus material

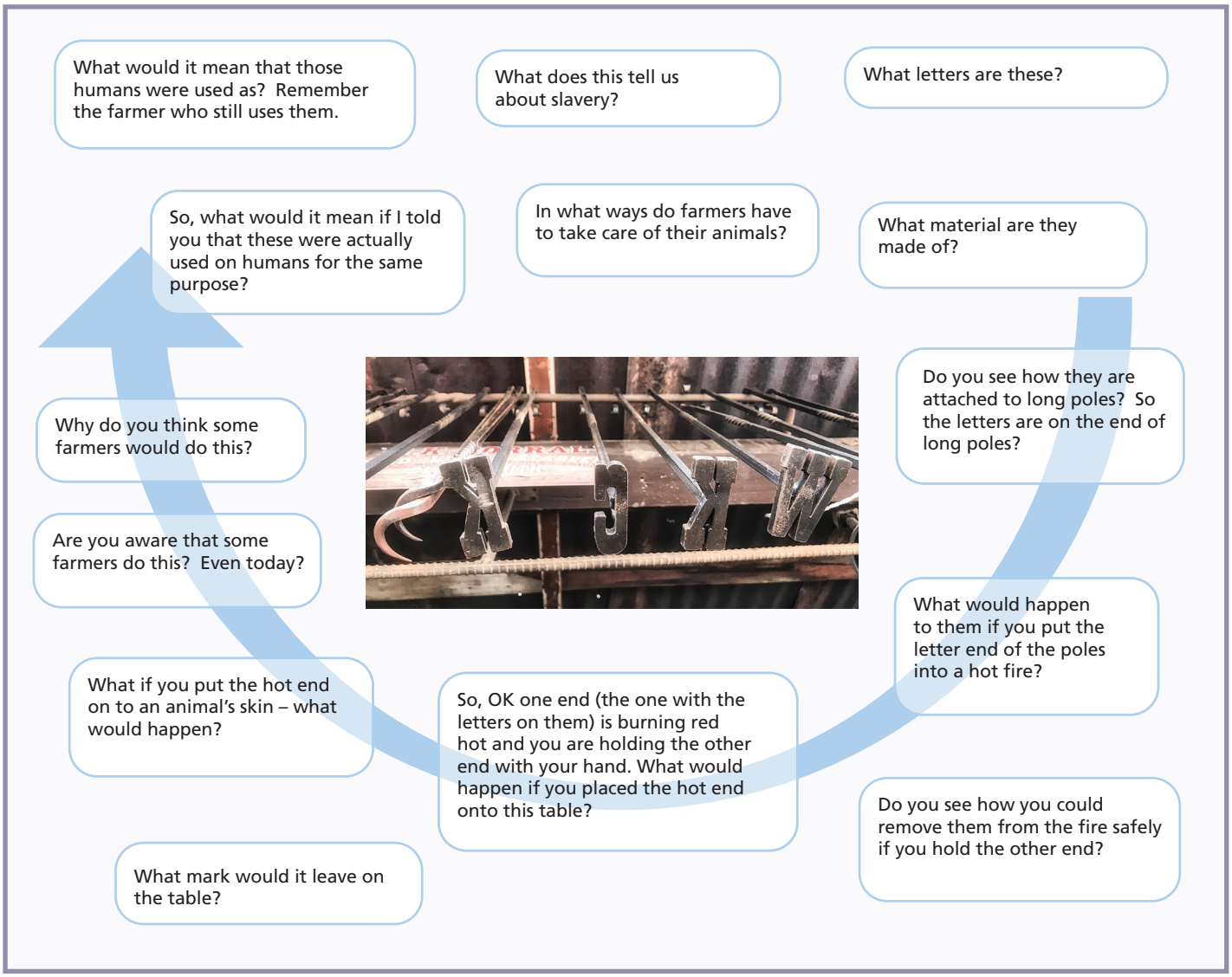
In the excerpt presented in Figure 1, an innovative teacher is attempting to bring pupils into the practices of historical enquiry by interrogating a facsimile copy of a series of Domesday entries for the local area (Figure 2). At first the entries appear completely impenetrable, but the dialogue proves it was still possible to make inferences from it.

The pupils learnt several things through this dialogue. At the level of substantive knowledge, they learnt that the Domesday survey was carried out in 1086 and that Figure 2 relates to the pupils' local area, with several locations named. They learned that it was handwritten in Latin. The pupils also acquired know-how or tacit knowledge relating to the close observation of elements of the text.[11] The pupils' observation became increasingly focused and purposive, as they acquired more knowledge and understanding. From staring at the scrawl and seeing nothing, pupils gradually noticed more: the language, the crossing-out/highlighting, the individual letters and then recognisable place-names. The dialogue worked on several dimensions to aid pupils' learning.

Generative interaction

The example shows dialogue being used as a generative interaction, not just between individual pupils but between different forms of knowledge. Dialogue is itself doing the epistemic work of making this difficult source more intelligible for pupils. We can observe that the contributions in lines 14, 20–24 and 26 are key utterances in this progression, because they direct the pupils to adapt their on-going activity and to focus on particulars in the source which they could read and identify and which yielded productive enquiry. These utterances, therefore, dynamically afford transformations of knowledge and practice in the same way as was observed in the earlier article relating to Chester's Norman history.[12] Furthermore, we can see different types of knowledge relying on each other to produce new knowledge. The substantive knowledge acquired within the dialogue plays a critical role in the development of know-how and similarly the know-how

Figure 4: A similar sequence of questions (put together by another trainee) around the use of branding irons in the transatlantic slave trade



enables the generation of substantive knowledge. Each form of knowledge does work that the other cannot to bring about what is learnt, and this makes the interaction dynamic and generative. There may have been other ways to achieve this effect, but in this case, it would not have happened without the dialogue.

Central to this process is the history teacher himself, who skilfully enables the pupils' activity. We can hear the doubters' voices (lines 4–6; 10) and pupils could have responded very differently had the doubts held sway. Yet by the end of this exchange the whole class became busily engaged in reading the text and attempting to discover what the crossed-out words may have been.[13] The way in which the teacher transforms the level of the pupils' engagement is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it is clear from the recordings and subsequent activity that the effect of this dialogue energised the whole class beyond only those who spoke. The pupils' utterances therefore represented the collective cognition of the class as a whole rather than just the thinking of each individual. Secondly, there is little in the way of exhortation on the part of the teacher to get the pupils engaged. Instead, the teacher coaches, encourages and feeds their interests by modelling and making suggestions (lines 21–22, and 24) which move the enquiry on, without doing the work for them.

Lines of questioning to promote dialogue

The teacher involved in this excerpt had very clear and precise rationales for his use of dialogue in his classes. He acknowledged that dialogue was unpredictable but that this made it engaging and exciting, in his own words: 'Pupils **always** surprise you'. He also acknowledged that the use of dialogue had to be carefully planned within lessons and that teachers needed to understand why they were using it. He considered the use of dialogue to scaffold pupils' understanding of stimulus materials and sources as particularly useful. Although the activity in the Domesday excerpt (Figure 1) looks like an improvised conversation between pupils and their teacher, it had actually been very carefully planned, not only to reveal to pupils that they can make sense of impenetrable materials but also to give them a sense of the scale of the Domesday enterprise. The teacher recommended to trainees on our teacher education programmes that they plan their lines of questioning to promote this kind of dialogue in the ways exemplified in Figures 3 and 4. In these figures, the source at the centre of enquiry is circled by planned questions, arranged in clockwise fashion, with the initial question in the one o'clock position and the final culminating question at the 12 o'clock position. The goal of the dialogue achieved through asking

Figure 5: Excerpt from another Year 7 class of a discussion between pupils about William's castle-building programme

The dialogue relates specifically to the question 'What might have happened if William had not built castles?'

Alex:	You wouldn't be seen as a proper king.
Teacher:	That's key isn't it? It's the difference between a king with power and king without. What is that difference?
Leah:	It could be the way you dressed as well.
Teacher:	Yes that's right ...
Emma:	You could like blackmail them.
Jasmin:	Bribe them.
Emma:	You could say the first one to take your shoes off would get £100.
Teacher:	Good – prizes and rewards would work wouldn't they?
Jake:	Basically power is when you can get people to do things so if you had an army and then you said take your shoes off and if you don't the army will be there to like kill you.
Teacher:	That would get people to do it wouldn't it. So we're exploring the concept of power. Why is William going to need lots of power just after he won the battle of Hastings?
Matthew:	He's going to need lots of power to like win the people over to thinking that he is king instead of Harold.

these questions was to enable pupils to give a comprehensive answer to the final question in the 12 o'clock position, which they may answer in writing. These questions are not a script but a plan. They are potential or possible questions to ask in order to initiate dialogue corresponding to a progression in understanding. Responses by pupils may necessitate or inspire different questions, of course, and there may be a need to leave out certain questions too. The balance between having clear goals and being responsive to pupils is clearly key here.

Planning questions in this way is a useful activity for all teachers and not just trainees (two of whom produced the examples in the figures) because it helps them simultaneously to identify the prior knowledge that would render the source significant in some way and to consider the questions by which they might help pupils to appreciate this significance. In reflecting on this kind of planning, the teacher, who was a mentor, claimed that one of the most common mistakes trainees make in conducting source-related discussions with classes is in asking the final question too soon and accepting superficial responses as a result. 'As a teacher you can't ask that last question first, because they [the pupils] will draw a blank. They have not done the work yet to be able to answer it'. The 'work' referred to here is the marshalling of the knowledge resources that dialogue can achieve so effectively. Nested within the questions are indirect references to prior knowledge learnt from elsewhere.

Dialogue as a negotiation of meaning

Figure 5 is an excerpt from a dialogue in a different school about William I's castle-building programme, prompted by the hypothetical question 'What if William had not built all these castles (exemplified in Figure 6), what would have been the consequences for him?' The subsequent dialogue, in which pupils share their relevant knowledge with each other, unpacks the notion of what it is to be a 'proper' king. The pupils appear to have an emerging understanding of the principles behind symbolic power and how the trappings of this power – i.e. the clothes, castles, wealth and displays of might – will help. This is an example of the pupils learning through dialogue. How this might win 'people over to thinking' that William is a 'proper' king is clearly considered important (quite rightly) and consideration of this idea exemplifies the process of bringing in prior knowledge through dialogue and dynamically applying it to the question in hand. We can see that certain speech-acts, such as Emma's in line 7 play a key role, as they affect subsequent thinking by Jasmin and Jake. The shared construction (and reconstruction) of meaning here highlights how pupils are learning within the dialogue.

This excerpt was part of a lesson which was intended to move pupils into a position where they could explain in what ways castles made William more powerful. The teacher

Figure 6: Some of the images of castles used in reference to the dialogue in Figure 5

The images, clockwise from top right show:
Clifford's Tower in York, Chester Castle, and the White Tower of the Tower of London

skilfully balanced activities in which pupils worked alone to research the functions of castles in this period with moments when the whole class reviewed these findings in dialogue with each other. The dialogic moments, as can be seen in the excerpt, also serve to engage the class in a discussion about how particular functions had an effect on William's power. Pupils' contributions were written on the board in notes which served to record the on-going thinking of the class and visually structure the content so that they could answer the overall question in writing afterwards. Without this dialogue the pupils would not have been able to make the link so easily from the castles' functions to explain their effect on power. This was very deliberate on the part of the teacher and was a common technique that she used to prepare children for writing their answers. The teacher referred to these dialogues, and the resulting board-work, as 'responsive writing frames' that were co-constructed with pupils using dialogue.[14]

Dialogue going wrong

The above excerpts are examples of how dialogue can be used successfully by history teachers.[15] In the many excerpts of every-day lessons that we have recorded and transcribed, there are also examples of the process going wrong or being unproductive.[16] Often this is because the classroom environment is not conducive to dialogue at all. This may be because the teachers and pupils have become too acquainted with didactic or monologic teaching routines or because the relationships between teachers and pupils are not characterised by appropriate respect, which is needed for the dialogue to be productive. There are other instances in which unanticipated dialogue emerged spontaneously or where dialogues took directions that had not been planned. These are not always unfavourable to pupil learning but those that are tend to happen when pupils are not clear about a particular task, or where the focus of dialogic attention is taken in a totally irrelevant direction and the teacher fails to address this diversion.

These instances are reminders that dialogic interactions do not happen in a way or an order that is possible to fully predict, prescribe or control. This may be off-putting for some teachers and encourage them simply to supply the knowledge that the children need, seeking to transfer it to them without attending to the meanings and connections that

pupils also need to make it intelligible and understandable. The argument I am trying to make through the excerpts is that dialogue serves both purposes – it helps knowledge to take root and proliferate among learners and at the same time inflects it with meaning that makes it more understandable and memorable. Dialogue enables this cognitive work to become visible and, arguably, teachers would have even less influence over this process if dialogues were not taking place.

Listening out for the emergent

While it is important for teachers to have clear goals for the use of dialogue, it is just as important that they listen out very keenly to the ideas pupils voice. Pupils will have many misconceptions and rudimentary understandings which dialogue can uncover and give teachers an opportunity to address. This is surely better than suppressing the pupils' voices and pretending misconceptions are not there. Similarly, children can make contributions which surprise even the teacher and move enquiry and learning on in unanticipated ways. This will inevitably present teachers with dilemmas, opportunities and difficult decisions to make, as Matthew Jones found in his study of local Birkenhead history, which tempted him to call a halt to the pupils' dialogue because he was running out of time. He acknowledged that doing so would have curtailed the pupils' negotiation of meaning and denied them what they needed.[17] The learning environment that the teachers establish in their history classrooms clearly plays a key role and the existence of just such a positive environment can be inferred from the excerpts in Figure 1 and Figure 3.

Conclusions

There is a temptation to reduce the practice of using dialogue to a series of simple steps or a formula to try to safeguard the process from going wrong and maximise its effectiveness. The excerpts provide us with examples of dialogue from a teaching practice perspective that go beyond simple issues of technique. There are important underpinning principles and values that lie hidden behind successful practice of this kind. In the quoted excerpts, Alexander's interconnecting principles are clearly at work, centring first on purposeful, deliberative and cumulative knowledge-building and meaning-making and second on a reciprocal, supportive and collective classroom environment.[18] We must question simplistic notions of 'effective' dialogue as being defined by the efficiency with which teachers can manipulate pupils' thinking through it. Ethical and respectful considerations are especially important here; history teachers should be exposing the dark practices of thought-manipulation and propaganda, and be wise to the purposes and goals behind the considerable influence that they legitimately exercise in their teaching. Effective dialogue must therefore accommodate a broader stance which includes valuing children questioning, challenging, arguing and reaching their own conclusions as well as recognising dialogue as an important historical and epistemic activity.

The arguments of advocates of knowledge-rich curricula derive from a reaction against the perceived failure of generic, competency-based curricula prominent in the 2000s.[19] As has been mentioned, this reaction has been followed by a greater recognition and interest in the role that substantive knowledge plays in learning history and an interest in how knowledge can be conceived as 'powerful'.[20] The close analysis of dialogic episodes like those in this article reveals the role that substantive knowledge plays in the formation of historical thinking and meaning. The generative interaction evident in these examples shows how different forms of knowledge rely on each other to transform and enable deeper and more profound thinking and knowing. This process is surely at the heart of the discipline of history as well as of whatever is meant by 'knowledge-rich' teaching. This kind of dialogue is also, surely, an example of how we can confer 'discursive and explanatory power' on young people.[21] It therefore seems both illogical and ironic to accept any proposal to teach 'powerful' knowledge and simultaneously deny learners the power to voice their thinking in its acquisition.

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8 Ofsted (2021). *Research Review Series: History*, Manchester: Ofsted, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-history/research-review-series-history
9 There are notable exceptions to this: Luff, I. (2001) 'Beyond "I speak, you listen, boy!": exploring diversity of attitudes and experiences through speaking and listening' in *Teaching History,* 105, *Talking History* Edition, pp. 10–17; Fullard, G. and Dacey, K. (2008) 'Holistic assessment through speaking and listening: an experiment with causal reasoning and evidential thinking in Year 8' in *Teaching History, 131, Assessing Differently Edition,* pp. 25–29; van Drie, J. and van Boxtel, C. (2011) '"In essence I'm only reflecting": teacher strategies for fostering historical reasoning in whole class discussions' in *International Journal of History Learning, Teaching and Research, 10*, no. 1, pp. 55–66.
10 Bird, M. and Wilson, T. (2019) *op.cit.*
11 I am using the term tacit knowledge here to describe processes that are happening that need not be made explicit and to avoid the use of the term 'skills'. In this context, it is a misnomer to describe the pupils as getting 'more skilled' as they already possessed the skills they needed. The issue at hand here is that knowledge directed them to draw on particular skills.
12 Bird, M. and Wilson, T. (2019) *op.cit.*
13 It did not take them long. They are Thurstaston, Calday, Meols, Wallasey, Neston. Unfortunately, the inter-pupil dialogue following this exchange was so intense that it was unintelligible on the audio recording and impossible to transcribe. We can nevertheless glimpse what the pupils learnt from this exchange.
14 Thomas Wilson used dialogue to scaffold and structure writing in a similar way – see Bird, M. and Wilson, T. (2019) *op.cit.*
15 Bird, M. and Wilson, T. (2019) *op.cit.* also show examples of successful dialogues.
16 More excerpts of lesson transcriptions can be found at Teacher Learning, www.teacherlearning.org, accessed 2022-03-27.
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