

Talk-Less Teaching

Isabella Wallace & Leah Kirkman



Practice, Participation and Progress



Crown House Publishing Limited

www.crownhouse.co.uk

First published by
Crown House Publishing Ltd
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK
www.crownhouse.co.uk

© Isabella Wallace and Leah Kirkman, 2014

The right of Isabella Wallace and Leah Kirkman to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Illustration © Sally Townsend, 2014

Sally Townsend has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, to be identified as illustrator of this work

Image page 158 © Maisna - Fotolia.com

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under current legislation no part of this work may be photocopied, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded or reproduced in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owners. Enquiries should be addressed to Crown House Publishing.

Crown House Publishing has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-184590928-4
Mobi ISBN 978-184590930-7
ePub ISBN 978-184590931-4
ePDF ISBN 978-184590932-1

Printed and bound in the UK by
TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

To every teacher who has ever forgotten to listen during a meeting, to every student who has ever felt confused during a lecture and to little Charlie, who despite valiant attempts to pay attention, eventually fell asleep during 'carpet time'.

Contents

Introduction: What is Talk-Less Teaching?	1
1 The Chameleon Teacher: Tailoring Your Teaching to the Needs of Every Learner ..	13
2 Undeniable Progress: Practice That Eliminates Passengers	31
3 What Makes a Great ...? Success Criteria Made Simple	47
4 Making Collaborative Work Work! Learner-Led Lessons with Real Impact	71
5 It's Only Easy If You Know the Answer: Questioning Strategies That Support and Stretch	99
6 Beyond the Red Pen: Progress-Orientated Feedback in the Classroom	115
7 Stepping Off Your Soapbox: Using Peer Teaching to Maximise Progress	131
8 Getting Through It All: Embedding Understanding Without Over-Using Teacher-Talk	151
9 Life Beyond the Test: Talk-Less Teaching for Instilling a Love of Learning	173
<i>Index</i>	<i>181</i>

Introduction

What is Talk-less Teaching?

When well-known comedians take to the stage, they face an audience full of avid listeners. They look down at a sea of eager faces, each belonging to a devoted fan who has paid for the privilege of drinking in their every word. Sometimes a lesson can feel like that for the teacher and the learners. Sometimes – but not always.

Imagine for a moment that the topic the stand-up intends to talk about isn't especially amusing. Imagine that it isn't familiar or even apparently relevant to the audience's frames of reference. Imagine that rather than having paid for the privilege of listening, the audience are there by obligation. Perhaps they are small children with ants in their pants or teenagers who have more 'important' things to be thinking about. Imagine, just imagine, that the comedian isn't a born entertainer whose mere facial expressions are enough to induce rapture and delight. Would the audience still listen attentively, absorb, understand and remember everything the stand-up said?

This imagined scenario is far closer to the reality of a classroom. It's a brave teacher, indeed, who would assume that their 'audience' is capable of listening attentively to and taking in every part of a 30-minute speech. This won't stop the odd teaching colleague from telling you, 'There's nothing wrong with talking to a class all lesson if that's the only way to get the information across to them!' The problems with this theory are tenfold:

- 1 It is never the *only* way to get the information across, as the strategies in this book will demonstrate.

2 | *Talk-less Teaching*

- 2 Talking can be the quickest way to impart information (so it can feel like the most efficient and satisfying way) but it is often not the most effective way to secure understanding and embed it in the long term.
- 3 The 'turn-up-and-teach' method is sometimes misused as an alternative to thoughtful planning – which means differentiation (among other aspects of good teaching) goes out the window.
- 4 It's impossible to get feedback from your learners about what they are understanding while you are the one doing the talking. So, if you talk for a long period of time, you run the risk of subsequently discovering that not only have some learners not understood you, but others haven't been actively listening at all.
- 5 If you're observing someone else's lesson for personal development or performance management purposes, you'll know that, as long as the teacher is talking, you have no gauge to assess the impact of that teaching. You will remain completely ignorant of whether learners are actually listening, and therefore making progress by gaining new knowledge and eliminating misconceptions.
- 6 This theory is often offered by that colleague who has always liked the sound of their own voice, and doesn't realise that not everyone else around them feels the same.
- 7 This theory is sometimes offered by Mr or Mrs Charisma Incarnate. This is the colleague who probably could have been one of the celebrated comedians mentioned above, but having taken to the classroom, has only to open their mouth to have every single learner mesmerised. It's easy for this person to mistakenly believe that every colleague around them possesses the same rare gift.
- 8 Having to listen to someone speak for a long period of time can cause an audience to feel restless and rebellious.
- 9 The longer the teacher talks for, the less time learners have to think for themselves, and the less time there remains for learners to ask questions they need answers to or discuss concepts so that they can understand them better.
- 10 Adhering to this theory can result in a sore throat.

Point number 7 is a particularly important one: outstanding teachers come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. There is no one way to teach a lesson, no single style that beats all the other styles hands down. As long as our learners are making fabulous progress, then we should stick with what we're doing (unless it's mind control or lobotomy).

Reduced teacher-talk is not desirable in essence. It is desirable to reduce teacher-talk when it is getting in the way of learners making the best progress that they can and when it is getting in the way of making learning meaningful, purposeful and, dare we say, even enjoyable at times. So, teacher-talk should only be viewed negatively if it is of poor quality or if it is impeding pupil progress. If you're confident that you're one of those gifted orators who can get every single learner in your class making progress through talking to them for long periods of time, or if you have a class made up entirely of learners with exceptional auditory processing skills who are indisputably benefitting from your lectures and have little need to practise the skills or use the knowledge that you are telling them about, then go ahead and talk till the cows come home. For the rest of us, we need to have a sizeable bank of alternative strategies up our sleeve to help learners to stay motivated, understand difficult concepts and make visible progress. This is what you will find in this book.

Of course, you may be reading this book because you want to help colleagues who, for one or more of the reasons above, are unwittingly impeding pupil progress through an excess of teacher-talk or inadvertently turning people off from learning through requiring them to be passive recipients – not just occasionally but on a daily basis. There are plenty of ideas in the chapters that follow to support teachers of any year group, and of any subject, to engage and enthuse their classes so that learners take responsibility for their own learning, and so that progress is highly visible and measurable. In fact, the strategies in this book are specifically designed to stop learners from relying on an apathetic takeaway approach to school ('You do it all for me and I'll pick up the nice grade at the end, thank you very much'). Instead, the practical strategies we outline support a *MasterChef* approach to school, where every learner is encouraged to be responsible for their own progress, and to use and practise what they learn with increasing confidence and skill.

Because that, dear teacher friends, is what talk-less teaching is all about: a way of teaching that engages and involves every learner, offers a variety of experiences in the classroom and has a demonstrable impact on the quality of lessons and on pupil progress. Talk-less teaching can improve outcomes for learners from nursery to university. Talk-less teaching shows you how to foster active and independent learning without compromising exam results or knowledge acquisition. It is all about making sure we have realistic, practical ways to help learners understand difficult concepts and learn new skills without making the poor dears listen incessantly to the sound of our voices, and to raise attainment without resorting to mind-numbing and formulaic teaching-to-the-test.

But talk-less teaching is much more than that. From the thousands of teachers with whom we've worked, one response in particular has chimed out above all others: talk-less teaching makes teaching *irresistible*. It doesn't just put the delight back into the learners' experience, it makes teaching thoroughly enjoyable too.

Chapter 1

The Chameleon Teacher

Tailoring Your Teaching to the Needs of Every Learner

If we're going to know for sure that learners are making genuine progress in our lessons, then we need to establish a starting point from which that progress can be measured. In other words, before we begin, we need to have an accurate understanding of learners' prior knowledge in relation to the topic we are teaching. Sometimes this important element of successful teaching and learning can be overlooked and we can instead resort to simply making an assumption about the starting point of our class.

A great teacher doesn't swan into the classroom with a second-by-second lesson plan and stick to it religiously, regardless of whether the learners are responding well or not. A great teacher doesn't drop in a quick 'progress check' or mini-plenary just for the sake of it and ignore what the exercise reveals about the understanding or skill of their learners. No, a great teacher craves any evidence they can get to assess the impact that their teaching is having, and they use this to inform how they teach their learners subsequently.

A great teacher assesses the impact of their teaching as they go along and adapts their teaching according to the information they glean. A great teacher is a readily flexible, ultra-adaptable 'chameleon teacher'.

A key element of talk-less teaching is about getting to know our learners better – what makes them tick, what helps them to understand and what their natural ‘roadblocks’ are. The less time we spend talking, the more time we have to ascertain this useful information. What pairings would work best for this particular activity? What specific examples are really capturing their interest? Who is already streets ahead with this topic? What part of this task are they struggling with most?

Talking less to our classes doesn’t mean that we will be withholding vital information or being obtuse and unapproachable. On the contrary, to forge the best working relationships with our classes, we need to spend more time listening and creating opportunities for two-way communication. Of course, we know how all-important feedback is in the classroom, but we must remember that feedback in the classroom doesn’t simply mean the constructive, diagnostic advice that the teacher gives the learners. There is, arguably, an even more important type of feedback that occurs in the classroom: the feedback that we teachers get from the learners about what they are taking in, remembering and understanding.

It is this feedback *from* the learners that should act as one of the greatest influences on our planning and delivery. This goes far beyond accessibility. We are not just talking about pitching the challenge at the correct level, but also about eliciting feedback about all the other vital elements of learning.

- Are there any adverse learning behaviours that could be rectified through an alternative approach to the lesson?
- Are there any learners who are not actively involved? How can they be drawn into the learning?
- Have I ‘hooked’ the class? How can I better engage their interest in the topic?
- Does the class have access to the right support materials? Are they asking questions that could be answered with an additional resource rather than depending on the teacher?
- Are there any pockets of learners that require additional support?
- Is the task I have planned for the learners coming together as I had hoped? Would it be beneficial to adjust the length or breadth?

Try This ...

In the staffroom, sit and talk to someone you don't know very well. Spend about five minutes telling them about your experiences of teaching, your challenges and achievements. Don't leave any gaps in your monologue. After five minutes of explaining this to them, consider the following:

- How much have you found out about your colleague's struggles or triumphs in the classroom?
- What have you learnt about what you could do to help your colleague?
- How do you know whether your colleague understands what you have explained?

OK, so we're being a bit facetious here – but you get the general message. If you have just engaged in that cringe-worthy conversation with a colleague, you will have found that you got some frustration out of your system and gave yourself an opportunity to toot your own horn, but you will have received no answers to the probing questions above. Your own monopoly of the talking time will have prevented you from getting any feedback (and from making any new friends in the staffroom!).

All of this brings us to a potentially uncomfortable revelation: plenaries do not belong exclusively at the end of a lesson. We can't risk waiting until the last 10 minutes to check on understanding, only to discover that half the class just haven't got it. This may be an uncomfortable revelation because many of you will remember that for years, the good old National Strategy had us all exploding into a flurry of Q&As, presentations, evaluations and, no doubt in some cases, *ritual chanting* at exactly 10 minutes before the bell. Deeply ingrained though this practice might be, it's time to step away from formulaic, prescriptive lesson structures and claim back the greatest skill we teachers have: *great professional judgement*. It is our professional judgement that will allow us to see when progress and understanding need to be checked, and consequently when and where we need to intervene to support and stretch our learners.

For example, our great professional judgement should tell us never, ever to interrupt learners who are busy making progress, simply to 'prove' the progress they are making!

Being a Chameleon Teacher

You may well have heard the famous assertion that to progress into being a 'good' teacher you need to *tighten* up, but to move from 'good' to 'outstanding' teaching you need to *loosen* up. What this aphorism highlights is just how important it is that, once we have ascertained information about our learners' prior knowledge, we use that knowledge to teach accordingly.

This can feel like a rather courageous mission at times. Of course, we will have a core plan for our lessons, but being a chameleon teacher can sometimes mean acknowledging that we will have to go into a scheme of work feeling a little 'blinder' than we would wish, and then think on our feet when it comes to the delicate, responsive selection of activity and focus for each learner.

Helping learners to make sustained progress requires frequent evaluation of their level of skill, knowledge or understanding, so that we can subsequently set just the right tasks to help them move onwards and upwards. In this chapter you'll find plenty of practical strategies to help you do just that.

Begin at the Beginning

By establishing the all-important starting point, any pupil progress made in your lesson will be far more visible to you and to the learners themselves. This is crucial, both for allowing you to assess the impact of your teaching on pupil progress, and for enabling learners to feel motivated by and proud of the headway they're making. Remember that, unless you're teaching a class full of identically programmed robots, this starting point will differ from learner to learner. Therefore, individuals' outcomes at the end of the lesson (or series of lessons) need to be measured against each individual's original starting point.

Of course, we'll usually find out very quickly if we've pitched the level of challenge inappropriately high (learners' blank stares and multiple mutterings of 'I don't get it' are a fairly good giveaway). At some point, most of us have had the experience of planning to illuminate a skill, such as writing a formal letter, only to discover five minutes in that some of the learners don't even know where they live, let alone how to spell their address. What is far harder to spot, however, is when a task has *underestimated* a learner's prior knowledge. In

these situations, the learner may complete an activity with great aplomb, but what genuine, measurable progress will have been made in their skill, knowledge or understanding?

We can't measure progress unless we first establish a starting point from which to measure it. This is a fact that is easily forgotten or ignored because it's far simpler to assume a common starting point, and teach to the middle, than it is to provide a differentiated learning journey for every child. The indisputable reality, however, is that Naheed has a far better grasp of events in *Macbeth* than Jordan does (because Naheed's father once took her to see a theatre production of it), and Henry knows more about serving in tennis than Jasmine does (because there's a tennis court behind his house).

Kick Off

Once you have a clear idea of the position from which each of your learners will be kicking off, you are ideally positioned to see exactly how to help each learner make genuine progress. Your initial 'needs analysis' will enable you to ascertain where the gaps in understanding and knowledge are for various groups of learners in your class, so you can ensure that the learning activities you use will target those gaps with impressive precision. But how do we conduct this all-important needs analysis?

KWL is a well-known way to help learners to see and celebrate their learning journey over a lesson (or series of lessons). Standing for *Know, Wonder* (or *Want to know*) and *Learnt*, this acronym lends itself well to the establishing of a starting point from which progress can subsequently be measured at the end of a lesson or unit of work.

Asking learners to articulate what they know at the beginning of a topic is clearly a must. Asking them to review what they have learnt at the end is similarly crucial. Asking them what they are 'wondering' can sometimes feel a little dangerous, as we may be nervous that their curiosity and pondering will become irrelevant and throw the lesson off track. However, ascertaining and celebrating learners' 'wondering questions' can be a valuable activity and cause progress to occur in unexpected ways. It can also go a long way to giving learners the motivation they need to investigate and think about a topic more carefully.

Gathering learners' questions and queries is also, obviously, an effective way of establishing current levels of knowledge and understanding. Doing this at the beginning of a lesson, and then allowing learners to answer their original questions at the end, is a useful technique to make the learners' progress highly visible to themselves. Of course, this will

only work if, having ascertained their needs at the beginning of the lesson, you use your chameleon teacher skills to ensure that the teaching and learning that ensues helps them to close those gaps!

There are many fun and effective ways to collect questions from your learners (there are lots more ideas for doing this in Chapter 5). In the meantime, here is a particularly useful one to help you tailor your teaching to the needs of your learners from the very outset of a lesson or scheme of work.

Strategy: The Wonderball

Those of you who have read *Pimp Your Lesson!*, and are already well-practised in the benefits of inflatable fun in the classroom, will enjoy this useful activity immensely.¹ Simply follow these easy instructions:

- 1 Share with learners the topic or 'core objective' that they are going to be working on in this lesson or unit of work.
- 2 Give each individual, pair or group a sticky note and ask them to write down one question they have about the topic or objective at this early stage in the lesson. In effect, what you are asking them to do here is to *personalise* the learning objective. In other words, you have told them what the overarching goal is and you are asking them to consider what *they, in particular*, will need to do, find out more about or get clarified in order to reach that goal themselves. This emphasises two things for the learners: first, the fact that while the core lesson objective may be the same for everyone, personal targets mean each learner will need to make a slightly different 'journey' to get there; and second, each learner needs to take responsibility for taking the action necessary for him or herself to achieve the overall goal.
- 3 At a convenient point, collect in the questions and stick them onto a beach ball or other (classroom-appropriate!) inflatable. Alternatively, you can pass the Wonderball randomly around the classroom and allow learners to read out their question before sticking it on and passing it on. After a couple of minutes, once everyone feels their particular question is represented (there will be plenty of duplicates – just ask learners to request the Wonderball if they've not yet heard their question mentioned), you can collect the ball back in.

¹ Isabella Wallace and Leah Kirkman, *Pimp Your Lesson! Prepare, Innovate, Motivate and Perfect* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

- 4 Consider the questions the learners have submitted – they will allow you to establish a general starting point as well as see what to focus on in the activity that follows. (Don't plough ahead with your original plans if these questions indicate that your plans were misjudged.)
- 5 Towards the end of the lesson (or series of lessons), allow the question-covered Wonderball to be passed randomly around the class. Each learner who catches it must remove one of the questions and attempt to answer it, or alternatively open up this question to the rest of the class. By this point, the learning that has occurred in the lesson (or series of lessons) should have enabled the learners to be able to answer the questions that they and their classmates posed before the learning journey began.
- 6 Bask in the glory of this visible progress and celebrate this achievement with your class. Showing your learners the undeniable progress they have made from one end of the lesson or unit of work to the other is a very powerful act.

An adaptation of this strategy is to write the kick-off questions yourself and attach them to the ball. If you're feeling really outstanding, and you have one of those packs of sticky notes that come in different colours, then you might like to differentiate your questions by colour. You can do this tactfully so that when Clever Clive catches the ball you can say, 'OK, Clive, I'd like you to pick ... erm ... a pink one please!' In this way, your assignment of questions to individuals looks arbitrary but in fact is cleverly and sensitively differentiated. Alternatively, you can tell learners that the questions are colour-coded according to difficulty/level/grade. In this way, every learner has the option of choosing a question that they feel is appropriate to their current target, as well as having an exciting opportunity to really challenge themselves.

There are many more practical and engaging ways to allow you to establish the starting point of your learners. Here are a few of our favourites.

Strategy: Boarding Card/Landing Card

This is a cute and quirky little trick to frame your lessons and consolidate learning. Imagine, for a moment, that your lessons are as exhilarating – and cover as much ground – as an international flight.

In this scenario, your lesson is a first-class trip on a top class airline. Provide each learner with a 'boarding card' as they enter the classroom. (This can be a very simple template – it only needs to say 'boarding card' and provide a space for the learner to write.) Don't keep them queuing to get in – none of your budget airline hell-on-earth here. Whisk them in

Practice, Participation and Progress

Beautifully nuanced, balanced, readable, and as free of jargon and ideology as it's possible to be, this outstanding book is a rich repository of ideas for showing that understanding does not have to be the victim of coverage. Steeped in the most rigorous laboratory of all – classroom practice – it joins an impressive list of books for teachers that will last long after His Master's Voice has fallen silent.

Barry J Hymer, Professor of Psychology in Education, University of Cumbria, Lancaster

Talk-Less Teaching lies at the crossroads where profound learning and deep engagement meet. Brimful of ideas and practical suggestions, it will give educators the confidence and ability to step boldly into a world of creativity, imagination and independent learning; where to teach less is to learn more; where active replaces passive and where great classroom practice lies not in teaching but in helping students to learn. A must-read for all those committed to outstanding learning and teaching.

Sir John Jones

The range of suggestions for tweaking, developing and even totally transforming classroom practice to ensure the engagement and immersion of all students in learning is breath-taking.

David Gibbons, Vice Chair, National Association for Teaching English Primary Committee

Teaching is vastly more complicated than just turning up and pontificating. This book knows that and has some cracking ideas to help you turn away from the politically influenced idea perpetrated by blind pawns that boring children is educating them.

Phil Beadle, teacher and author

Successful learning is the outcome when children and young people are active participants and are engaged in their lessons. Listening is in the final analysis a passive activity. In this book Isabella and Leah challenge teachers and those who observe lessons to re-think practice. It offers a wide range of practical tips and strategies too. If we really want children and young people to achieve more this book offers another way that has the potential to really make a difference in the classroom, the place that matters most.

David Crossley, Executive Director, Whole Education Network

What defines this text is the feeling that the authors truly appreciate the direction of today's classroom. They offer instantly useable, flexible and adaptable resources to support all types of teacher ... This is a book that celebrates the dynamic fashion of our profession.

Julie Wright, English teacher

Talk-Less Teaching offers excellent strategies to help teachers avoid the trap of becoming too one dimensional (i.e. using teacher-talk excessively). Not only are these strategies road tested on learners of all ages, they are highly engaging and help the teacher get real proof that progress is taking place.

Andy Griffith, co-author *Outstanding Teaching: Engaging Learners*

This book offers stunningly practical advice about how to make all the pupils in your class feel more confident and more involved and learn more. Isabella and Leah thoroughly kill the myth that teaching is just about knowledge and what you impart. What follows is bucket-fulls of practical ideas for teachers to put into practice immediately.

Stephen Cox, Managing Director, Osiris Educational



WWW.OSIRISEducational.CO.UK



Education Teaching skills and techniques

ISBN-13: 978-1845909284



9 781845 909284