Talking allowed: “I really enjoy being able to discuss something without the teacher sort of telling us what to say”

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to determine whether early adolescents participating in a series of Paideia Seminars moved from surface to deep learning in their understanding of a concept within a concept based curriculum unit. The claim is that the Paideia Seminar would assist the development of two of the key competencies in the new New Zealand Curriculum (2008), which is to be implemented in all schools by 2010. These competencies are; ‘Thinking’, which involves the development of metacognitive skills and processes and ‘Relating to others’, the encouragement of interacting effectively with a diverse range of people. These skills are deemed essential for students in New Zealand, and in particular provide what Nuthall (2007), considers multiple opportunities to learn. If these key competencies are to become a reality in New Zealand classrooms new pedagogical approaches need to be considered. Otherwise, there is the risk of having a new curriculum, where teachers simply rewrite how they are teaching the old content.

The proposition was that a Paideia Seminar would provide Intermediate Teachers (Students aged 11-13) with an intervention, aimed at encouraging more active participation by the students. The Paideia Seminar involves the students being given a controversial open-ended question. The students then prepare for the seminar, participate in the seminar and then participate in a class post discussion on the seminar. Results showed the Paideia Seminar reduced classroom lecture time (observed during ‘normative practice’ of a ‘normal classroom discussion’). This study found that the complexity of the discussion increased when teacher talk was reduced and the nature of the interaction included mostly student-to-student responses. That is, student-to-student responding with a question, challenge, or expansion of ideas led to enhanced outcomes and increased the amount of instruction based on seminar discussions that enhanced independent student thinking and improved reasoning skills.
Rationale for research:

During a practicum visit (November, 2007) at an Intermediate school to observe University Graduate Primary Students, the Principal mentioned to the researchers his concern at the level of teacher talk within the classrooms. Whilst on a recent school trip to Japan a student had voiced to him how ‘bored’ he was this year because “the teacher talked too much.” The Principal jokingly said his solution was duct tape! The Principal asked for professional advice on how to stimulate students talking more and encouraging teachers to talk less. The subsequent consideration of various interventions, which might address this problem, led to the choice of the Paideia Seminar as the most appropriate.

Attention and respect for student input are the major variables that differentiate a Paideia seminar experience from the rest of the class discussion experiences. The students are required to develop meta-cognitive skills in thinking about texts/concepts, and become aware of and respect for their peers. Chesser, Gellatly & Hale (1997) monitored the implementation of Paideia seminars and found that one of the most powerful findings was how important it was for students to be able to talk in school and be heard. This attention to students’ actively thinking, participating, and respecting other viewpoints contrasts with the previous findings from Goodlad (1984), that in regular classrooms, students spend more than 80 percent of their class time passively listening. Even in the remaining 20 percent of active time, teachers were often trying to “cover” a lesson and elicit correct answers to questions of fact. Subsequent research by Van Hees (2008), found similar results in New Zealand classrooms:

> Whether in junior or senior classes, what is evident is that classrooms are most often not optimal in terms of engaging children in rich, dialogic talk – talk that expands and enriches, talk that demands of the children thinking and precision of expression (p.14).

In the many observations of classroom discussions the researchers noticed that most discussion happens as an IRE (initiate, respond, evaluate) sequence in which the teacher initiates a question, the student responds, and the teacher evaluates the response (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Cazden, 2001; Wells, 2000). But increasingly schools are seeking ways of involving students in discussion, which are less teacher led (Forman, McCormick, & Donato, 1998), and more student led.

The Paideia seminar has the potential to incorporate the principles of many of these approaches and enables students to engage in a dialogic discussion, where there is a constant interaction between meaning, all of which have the potential of influencing others (Bakhtin, 1981). As a result of the exchange of ideas within the group, new ideas may emerge which were not considered before the discussion (Lindstrom, 2006; Vygotsky, 1986; Wortham, 2001). Lindstrom (2006), refers to dialogue as a disposition rather than a method, where participants are encouraged to adopt an open and inquiring disposition. These dispositions include; being prepared to listen, following rules of conduct and supporting their viewpoints with evidence. Philgren (2008) distinguishes between dialogue and debate, where dialogue is considered as a ‘group-think’(p.68), exploring ideas together to come to a shared understanding, rather than having one person’s ideas as the winner. This is not about
knowledge transference between students but is instead a transactive exchange of ideas and multiple perspectives in the construction of meaning.

The Paideia Seminar builds upon the idea of a community of learners (Sewell & St. George, 2008), which are participatory, proactive, collaborative and given over to the construction of meaning. Yet many classrooms do not provide practice in the development of these skills. The purpose of designing learning communities is to integrate students’ interactions with the curriculum, with each other and the teacher, so that the entire experience contributes to the development of intelligent learners. One of the most significant impacts of participating in a community of learners is the establishment of new identities as learners who are intent on learning and who are aware that their learning is rooted not only in their active individual efforts but also in their collaborative endeavour (Rogoff, 2003). It is argued (Brown & Campione, 1998; Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996), that students develop deeper conceptual understandings in a community of learners, compared with those who attend the more traditional classrooms. When students are given some degree of control over what they are learning they tend to ask more thoughtful and complex questions. The researchers believe the Paideia Seminar provides the structure to allow this to occur and encourages students to listen to each other.

**History of Paideia**

In 1982 Mortimer Adler led a group of like-minded scholars in publishing a series of books, under the banner of educational reform, which ignited much debate about the quality of American Public schools. The Paideia Group as they became known, chose the word Paideia to encompass the overall conceptual framework of the proposal based on citizenship, work and lifelong learning in a democratic society. Paideia comes from the Greek pais, or paidos, which means the upbringing of the child and the nurturing of the child through learning (National Paideia Center, 2002). In his book, The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto, Adler, (1982), who was more of a philosopher than an educational expert, argued that although most children experience equal amounts of time spent in school, they are not receiving the same quality of education. He proposed Paideia as a model he thought might rectify that inequality. Adler drew on John Dewey’s emphasis on active learning, Horace Mann’s commitment to a democratic education and equity, and Robert Maynard Hutchins’s belief that rigor and high standards must be applied to intellectual endeavours. The Paideia Proposal made a significant contribution to the subsequent reforms which included many of the Paideia principles, such as the idea that all children can learn (Roberts, 1998).

Although it gained a following, many teachers criticised the abstract ideas presented in the book, which they felt had no practical application in schools. Since the publication of The Paideia Proposal, other books have been published, which have attempted to respond to these early criticisms (e.g., Paideia, Problems and Possibilities, 1983; The Paideia Programme, 1984). As the programme is about whole school reform, much of the material is not related to classroom practice, however these resources do provide a rich source of information about Paideia teaching and learning. Since 1988 The National Paideia Centre (NPC) at the University of North Carolina has rekindled an interest in Paideia education and there are now 80 schools in ten states in America working in the programme.
Past research on the Paideia Seminar has described various educators’ experiences with the implementation of the programme at their respective institutions. While many schools have embraced the Paideia proposal in its entirety and restructured their total programme (e.g., Sullivan High School in Chicago, (Brazil, 1990), Illinois Richmond, California Unified School District 1990, the Phoenix Schools of Chattanooga, Tennessee, 1995), others have elected to incorporate only certain aspects of Paideia. Elementary schools (Arnold, Hart, & Campbell, 1988), middle schools (Chesser et al., 1997), high schools, and even college classes (Holden & Kelly, 1995; Sakalys & Watson, 1985), have all included the seminars in their regular schedule. Currently, there are no schools in New Zealand incorporating the Paideia method in their programmes.

The Paideia Seminar

The Paideia Seminar, which is the focus of this study, is one of the three parts of the Paideia Programme. The other two parts include didactic instruction and project-based education. The Paideia Seminar has a structured framework, which provides students with a method of preparing for a seminar through critical reading, experiential evidence, research, and informed discussion to promote higher-level thinking. Roberts (1998), representing the National Paideia Centre, wrote The Paideia Classroom: Teaching for Understanding and this book clarified the role and the process of creating questions for the Paideia Seminar.

The teacher provides an open-ended controversial question or statement to provoke argument and debate with the expectation of transformative learning. Through this practice of argumentation it is hoped that it will also provide students with the facility to transfer these skills to other areas of learning. Because the Paideia Seminar is not a teacher led instructional method it is an opportunity for students to interact and talk with each other, construct and de-construct ideas together (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002).

Historically, Paideia seminars have predominately been examined in research through reading comprehension, involving the use of texts, which all students receive. The researchers acknowledge however that a more recent refocusing of Paideia over the past decade, and resources provided by the National Paideia Center (Roberts, 1998) has expanded the notion of “rich texts” to include the work of local authors, a mathematics problem or a piece of artwork. These “texts” are rich to the degree that they are challenging and allow the development of critical ideas. In one of the projects in this research the ‘rich text’ was derived from the ‘concept’ being studied in a Social Studies unit, (e.g., “Fairness in the Olympic Games”) and the provocative question was “Why were the paralympics screened late at night on National Television?” This research endeavoured to investigate if this type of provocative question utilising a Paideia Seminar would give more opportunities for students to talk and interact with each other and for the teacher to talk less.

The Teachers’ role in the research:

The teachers provided didactic teaching on the background of the concept (Fairness in the Olympics, Term 3 and Tourism Term 4) to be studied, assisted students to prepare for the seminar and devised the open-ended discussion question to be used at the start of the seminar. They participated in ten-minute interviews with the Researchers prior to and post
the Paideia seminars to ensure a shared understanding of the process. During the Paideia Seminar, the teachers became Observers/Listeners and recorded on a socio-gram the discussion – i.e., arrows between which students interact with whom and the nature of that interaction – i.e., question asked, extension of what they say, challenge etc. They recorded as many of the questions and answers the students asked each other as possible; recorded any misconceptions the students demonstrated about their understanding of the concept and recorded any advanced understandings of the concept. Following the seminar the teacher presented the socio-gram to the class of the discussion and the class as a whole evaluated the success or non-success of the discussion. At this point the students may wish to modify or change both the individual and group goals for next time. After reading the recorded questions and answers, the teachers may utilise the results to inform or modify planning as a means of formative assessment.

**The Students’ role:**

The students prepared for the open-ended questions prior to the Paideia Seminar, through engaging with Noodle, websites, literature, interviews, class discussions and experiences. During the Paideia Seminar the students answered the open-ended discussion question with their prepared answers. The students were given question stems to assist them in formulating questions. As the seminar progressed the students were to challenge, question, extend and expand on other students’ evidence. They had the opportunity to disagree agreeably. The students completed a ‘student self-evaluation’ response sheet after each seminar.

**Methodology:**

An exploratory design was utilised (Cresswell, 2003), and involved a mixed methods approach, in which the researchers collected qualitative data and subjected the responses to quantitative analysis. The process involved multiple stages of data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) over a period of 4 months and the data was sub-divided into two main categories: Complexity of Discussion and Nature of Interaction. SOLO taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 1982) was used in this study to illustrate and analyse what surface and deep learning looked like.

At the pre-structural stage of SOLO students acquire unconnected pieces of information, which have no organization and do not make sense. At the uni-structural stage, simple but obvious connections are made but their significance is not grasped. At the multi-structural level a number of connections may be made but the meta-connections between them are missed, as is their significance. In the relational level, students are able to appreciate the significance of the parts in relation to the whole; being able to internalise different ideas from other sources and make connections. At the extended abstract level students are able to make connections not only within the given subject area but also beyond it. The responses involve the student going outside the known and being able to elaborate and transfer the principles and ideas underlying a specific instance. ‘Relational’ and ‘elaborative’ constitute a change in the quality of thinking that is cognitively more challenging than surface learning (Hattie, 2009, p. 28). The implications are that the learner is active in the process of learning. It is through active learning and deep-level processing according to (Salomon & Perkins, 1989) that are central to success and transfer of information.
There was constant interaction with the data, the ideas and ongoing dialogue to determine the process of analysis and refining the Nature of Interaction data. Through the comparative method suggested by (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), tentative categories emerged and tentative hypotheses were proposed and tested again the data until a theoretical framework was developed in light of the research questions. Namely: what happens when students are given opportunities to talk and interact with each other? And what happens when teachers talk less and students talk more? What happens when the focus is on student and not teacher questioning?

The school was asked to choose two control classes and two experimental classes of year 7 students in the Decile 6 Intermediate School, in Auckland, New Zealand. These classes were reasonably aligned in ability and size with a multicultural mix of students. The researchers filmed/voice recorded 3 episodes in each class, following an initial observation and recording of normative practice in each class. Each of the seminars were videotaped and audiotaped and transcribed. This involved videoed footage, voice recordings and interviews pre and post the episodes. Initially, the researchers conducted 2 professional development days for the teachers involved in the study. The two days gave both the researchers and teachers a chance to come to a shared understanding of the goals and the processes involved in the Paideia method.

Results:

This study found that the complexity of the discussion increased when teacher talk was reduced and the nature of the interaction included mostly student-to-student responses. That is, student-to-student responding with a question, challenge, or expansion of ideas led to enhanced outcomes. In addition, the amount of instruction based on seminar discussions increased, which enhanced independent student thinking and improved reasoning skills. The Paideia Seminar involves preparation for the discussion, the seminar and then a post discussion.

Comments varied with some students noting that they enjoyed listening to other students:

Student: I think everyone had something good to say. Miss K told us what the topic was going to be so I asked my parents what their opinion was as well. I talked a bit but mostly I just prefer listening

Student: I enjoyed listening to other people when they were saying if the year 7’s were allowed to participate in the Olympics because it gave me so many different ideas

Student: I was scared to talk but it was really nice to hear more about it and also interesting to talk about it. I got lots of ideas from the children

Student: I found this more interesting by listening to it than saying something because I felt like I’ve learnt heaps about the Olympics

Being too shy was an apparent block for some students to speak out:
Student: I was too shy to talk what my mind said but I felt great when I spoke my mind

Student: I usually speak up an inch more but I didn’t really have that much to say

Some students identified problems they experienced seminars

Student: I wasn’t happy about this seminar because it’s the same people speaking and it’s hard for other people to share they’re idea but I did enjoy their ideas

Student: Everyone kept on talking over me but hopefully the recorder heard me. I was really good that I spoke up

Student: I think it was fair BUT not everyone got to talk. I felt happy though, because I shared my ideas, most of them

Student: Today I said lots but I had a good idea but I kept it in-side and everyone didn’t talk only some of us did but still it was a good seminar

Discussion:

The large number of comments, which related to being “too shy” to speak up, is to be highly expected of this age group. Most contemporary Western industrialised societies view early adolescence as a time of great change (Stevenson, 1989). Youngsters aged 10 to 14 are thought to be working toward identity development, trying on myriad selves along the way. They are caught between childhood and adulthood, struggling for independence and responsibility, yet still requiring the support and reassurance of caring adults (Bishop, 2008).

Being too “shy” to talk or “I should have talked more!! Should have communicated more!! Understand more!!” is important to recognise as it has become apparent that some disengagement at Secondary School level begins in the early adolescent age group, Years 7-10 (Bishop, 2008). USA researchers Eccles and Midgley (1989) predicted disengagement would become a problem unless schools changed in developmentally appropriate ways to provide the kind of social context that will continue to motivate students’ interest and engagement. As students mature they would disengage first psychologically and then physically from school as they matured into and through adolescence.

The Paideia Seminar offers an alternate cognitive experience for students and can allow for students to ‘emerge’ who are often quiet during a ‘normal’ class discussion This is important because peers at this age usually become much more dominant in a totally different way than they are in primary schools. “Schools can be very lonely particularly given the structures of high schools. So I think the whole identity thing is very powerful in the early years…I think schools should take more responsibility for making learning cool – forgive the
cliché – and to turning kids on to giving them multiple identities at that early a period. We underestimate the power of peers on that period” (Hattie, 2008 in Bishop, 2008).

Dr Sally Hansen of Massey University agreed wholeheartedly with the premise that students this age require meaningful opportunities to express themselves: “We don’t listen to kids enough. Sometimes they are telling us loud and clearly why school is so unattractive to them and why they don’t engage. I don’t think we listened enough to student voices. There are very few avenues at the intermediate and secondary levels for student voices to come to the fore and for us to hear what their experiences are” (Hansen, 2008 in Bishop, 2008).

Limitations of the study were that for the researchers, though they strongly recommended to the teachers that their role during the seminars were to record misconceptions, questions and interesting comments from the students as a means of formative feedback, this happened only in a minor way. The researchers realised that this was unrealistic for teachers who were new to the Paideia Seminar to do this. What they did varied; during one seminar Teacher 3 recorded questions but did not do this again. Teacher 4 was very conscious of non-participating students and observed their behaviours; in general, the teachers saw their role as ‘managing’ the seminars rather than as non-participants. Other misgivings about the seminars from the teacher were that they saw the seminars as too consuming in an already crowded curriculum and that reticent students, still contributed little. Misgivings about the seminars from the students included the lack of time to prepare and some struggled to achieve their goals of participating more.

Future curriculum and teaching implications following this project could be the potential for the seminars to be used as a means of formative assessment. The teachers could use the seminars as a means of formative assessment if they record questions, misconceptions, and important ideas that the students suggest during the seminars. The teacher could then address these recorded observations. If the teachers become observers and listeners during the Paideia Seminar this gives them an opportunity to become aware of what individual students are thinking and knowing. They can then provide meaningful and appropriate feedback (Hattie, 2009).

To address the on-going difficulty of getting reticent students to participate in a public domain, the researchers suggest that students could participate in a Socratic seminar on-line during the preparatory stage of the seminars. E-learning could be beneficial, because the students can be practising debating, challenging and arguing their stance on-line. This takes the pressure away from being exposed in the public domain, until they become more confident to express their ideas orally.

The researchers believe the Paideia Seminars have the potential to move students from surface to deep learning. As suggested by Hattie (2009) teachers need to provide students with multiple opportunities and alternatives for developing learning strategies. The researchers view the Paideia Seminar as one of these opportunities to teach specific skills in order for students to develop deeper understanding of a concept or concepts. The specific skills required for a Paideia Seminar include the ability to argue or disagree agreeably. Being part of a community of learners can contribute to deep learning. “Knowledge is more often something that is created not in individual people but in spaces between people” (Gilbert, 2005).
The next step for the researchers would be to repeat the study with larger numbers across a wider range of Intermediate schools.

NB: A full version of this paper has been submitted to an International Journal for publication.
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*This document was added to the Education-line collection on 28 August 2009*

**Acknowledgements:**
The researchers wish to acknowledge the assistance and support of their colleagues:
Tony Hunt, Professor John Hattie, Professor Viviane Robinson, Dr. Christine Rubie-Davies