

Reading 9

Required Reading

A staffroom conversation

Wally Morrow

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This dialogue is one of the series of dialogues and cases that Wally Morrow and other members of the writing team prepared for the *Learning Guide Working in Classrooms: Teaching, Time and Space*. We've included it in the set of readings rather than in the Learning Guide partly because it is longer than the other cases and dialogues, but also because it is much more explicitly concerned with concepts. The dialogue is linked to Activities 35 and 36 in the *Learning Guide*, so be sure to consult the *Learning Guide* for reading instructions.

Notes

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One day when Emma comes into the staff-room for long break, feeling tired from struggling to teach the Grade 10 class, which has 45 learners in it, and always gives her trouble, some of the other teachers are having a conversation:

Bulelwa: How am I supposed to teach Home Economics properly, when none of the stoves and sewing machines in the Home Economics room work, and the Department ignores my orders for the ingredients and materials I need to teach properly? What makes my job even more impossible is that the new textbooks haven't arrived yet, I have no textbooks for Grades 8, 9 and 10, and in Grades 11 and 12 the learners have to share the few textbooks we have, and they are old, from years ago, with pages missing, and scribbling and rude comments all over them. Now just tell me, how am I supposed to teach?

The other teachers who have heard Bulelwa shake their heads and click their tongues in sympathy, but Mr Wole Bala disagrees.

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Wole: No, no, no, Mama, you are old, but you have such a short memory. We have always had these troubles, have you forgotten what it was like under Bantu Education? The problem is that we have got sucked into what the Whites think teaching is. In the olden days when girls had to learn how to cook or make beadwork, and the boys had to learn how to look after the cattle and defend themselves on raiding parties, we didn't expect the 'government' or the 'Department' to supply us with equipment, and as for textbooks! In those days no one expected to have a textbook to tell them what to say, teaching was a kind of conversation between older and wiser people and the children and youths.

Wole Bala surprised himself with the last thing he said, and other teachers in the staffroom came closer to hear what was going on.

Yasmine: Come on, Mr Bala, we have heard enough of all this old-fashioned stuff – with the girls doing the cooking and the boys doing the hunting. The world has changed, and become much more complicated than the simple world you are talking about. What the kids of today need to learn is how to earn their own living, they need to learn maths and science, they need be able to get a job, and in today's world that means being able to do all sorts of things our ancestors could not even have imagined. In the past teaching might have been a kind of cosy conversation, but nowadays that won't get us very far. I would like to see you teach History without a textbook, I suppose you would just have little chats with the kids, and call that 'teaching'!

Wole felt insulted by Yasmine's tone of voice, and by what she said, and what made it worse was that she is a woman and women shouldn't cheekily talk to men like that, especially when the men are older than they are. But at the same time others were listening to what was going on and he didn't want to make a fool of himself, he felt that he had to defend himself.

Wole: Now listen here, Yasmine, I am a history teacher and I know the world has changed and we need to teach different things now, but I was trying to say to Bulelwa that it is no use sitting around and moaning about the Department, we need to be resourceful, like our people in the past were, and make the best of what we have. But the most important thing I was saying is that we need to remember that in the past teaching was like a conversation, it was a form of communication between the wiser people of the community and young, but not the kind of corrupt one-way 'communication' which was imported by the colonisers, with one voice

telling us what to think and who we are. It was a form of communication which bound communities together and was the bridge between the knowledge of the community and the growing generation, it was the way in which younger members of the community were initiated into the way of life of the community, and how it lived from day to day. The 'modern' world is all very well, but look what it's done to our communities! The youth no longer have any respect for tradition or for older people, they run around the streets like wild animals, many of us fear for our lives when we catch the train, and look at all the problems we have with disobedient pupils at school.

The phrase 'disobedient pupils' infuriated Yasmine, and triggered off an angry response:

Yasmine: I suppose, Mr Bala, that you also oppose the democratic government's banning of corporal punishment of learners – you would like to beat 'disobedient pupils' into submission? To talk of teaching as a conversation is all very well, but have you forgotten that not all conversations are warm and pleasant, have you never noticed that some people use conversations as an opportunity to dominate others; (here she glanced towards Wole) to show how smart and clever they are, and how stupid and ignorant other people are? When Mr Spellman makes one of his famous speeches here in the staffroom, he thinks that he is having a 'conversation' with the staff, but he is not, he is simply 'laying down the law' and threatening any member of staff who 'gets out of line', letting them know that he has the power to make them 'redundant' when the next round of 'retrenchments' comes along.

Yasmine was shocked by the last remark she made, and looked around nervously in case Mr Spellman had come into the staffroom. She hoped that no one would report to Mr Spellman what she had said. She had been carried away and didn't really mean to make that remark about the school principal. Joe, a student doing his teaching practice at the school and blind to staffroom politics, didn't notice that Yasmine had upset herself by her own remark, but he was excited by arguments, and he now jumped into the conversation:

Joe: You people here don't seem to have heard of anything. We had a lecture at college about Paulo Freire. He made a contrast between monological and dialogical teaching, and he called the former 'a banking conception of education'.

Some people in the staffroom were impressed by this speech, but they felt

that they couldn't really say anything because they had never heard of this person whose name made him sound Spanish or Portuguese, particularly because of the way Joe pronounced it, with great authority. But other people were cross with Joe, coming and displaying his irrelevant 'college' knowledge here just when the conversation was becoming interesting. But Emma could see what Joe was getting at:

- Emma:** Listen Joe, we are not interested in whether it was Freire, or the Pope or the President who said it, but explain to us what you think the difference is between 'monological' and 'dialogical' teaching, and what a 'banking conception of education' is.
- Joe:** Well I think that what Freire meant was that in the 'traditional' way of teaching the teacher's voice is the only one that is heard in the teaching situation...
- Bulelwa:** All these big words – 'form', 'dialogical', 'monological' – are you trying to give us an English lesson? There is so much noise in our classrooms that the teacher's voice can't even be heard, so you are talking rubbish.
- Wole:** Just because you are old, and half deaf doesn't mean that kids are as well. When Joe says 'the traditional way of teaching' he is talking about the 'tradition' of the Whites, not our traditional way of teaching.
- Joe:** ...what I meant was that, usually, the teacher is the one who speaks and needs to be listened to obediently, and this is 'monological teaching'; the learners just have to listen silently. A 'monologue' is a long speech by one person or a play which has only one actor. Most of the lectures we get at college are monologues, the lecturer just stands there and talks for about an hour or so – sometimes longer. In a monologue there is only one 'voice', only one person speaking – usually just 'laying down the law'. Most teaching is a kind of monologue, most teachers see themselves as 'transmitting knowledge' to learners. Now, what interested me about the conversation you were having is Mr Bala's idea that teaching is a kind of conversation. In a conversation there is always more than one 'voice' – a conversation is a kind of 'dialogue' with a number of 'voices' involved – and if it is teaching we are talking about then the learners' voices are the most important part of the process. Teaching should be learner-centred and not teacher-centred.

Wole was flattered by what Joe was saying, he felt that it supported his view, but there were some things that worried him, particularly the bit about the learners' voices and teaching being learner-centred:

- Wole:** In the olden days we didn't have banks, and I was interested in what you were saying about a 'banking conception of education'.
- Nomsa:** But he hasn't said anything about a 'banking conception of education', he just said the words, and I don't know what they mean. Joe, who wanted to impress Nomsa because he was thinking of asking her for a date, tried to remember what he had read in his college notes:
- Joe:** In a 'banking conception of education' knowledge is seen as a kind of commodity, like money, which needs to be 'deposited' in the minds of the learners, like money is deposited in a bank.

Bulelwa was getting very cross with Joe and his big words and meaningful staring at Nomsa, and she didn't like the way he pretended to be so smart about things he had no experience of:

- Bulelwa:** What do you really know about teaching? You come here and tell us about all this theoretical stuff you learnt at college, about 'Pa-low-free-eerie', 'voices', 'commodities', 'banks' and 'money'. You will get to know all about 'voices' when you come into one of our rowdy classrooms, and you will learn all about 'money' and 'banks' if ever you get a job as a teacher, and have to try to survive from month to month on the pittance you will be paid. You will find out what 'teaching' is when you try to teach in one of our overcrowded classrooms.

Other teachers nodded their heads in agreement, and were pleased to see how Bulelwa was putting Joe in his place. But Nomsa remembered what Wole had said about teaching being a kind of conversation and was interested in the way Joe's talk was starting to help her to understand more clearly what that meant:

- Nomsa:** I'm now beginning to see what Joe is talking about: he is connecting the way we teach with what we think knowledge and learning are. If we think of knowledge as a kind of thing which can be bought or sold, or transferred or given to someone, like a sack of mielies or a necklace, then we will think that the way to teach is for the teacher to pass over the knowledge she has to the learners. And the way to pass it over is for the teacher to talk – so the only 'voice' in the teaching situation is the teacher's voice. I think it is right to say that how we teach depends on what we think learning and knowledge are, but the only way I can think about learning is getting something we didn't have before, and, now that I think about it, I don't know what I think knowledge is.

I agree that it is not a 'thing', but I don't know what else it could be.

Emma could see what Nomsa was trying to say, and she tried to help:

Emma: Look, I think the point is this: in the Geography textbooks there are all sorts of facts, facts about where countries and towns are, what vegetation there is in different parts of the world, what the political and physical shapes and boundaries of the of the countries of the world are, and so on. But these facts are simply in the textbook. If anyone is going to *learn* from the textbook they need to do something, they need to be active to get those facts out of the books and into their minds. The teacher is there to help the learners to do this.

Andile: But, Emma, this doesn't help. You are still thinking of knowledge as a collection of 'things' – which you now call 'facts' – and you are thinking of learning as getting those 'facts' into the mind of the learner. In any case the 'facts' are not in the textbooks, they are in the real world, what is in the books is simply some printing and pictures. And if we think of teaching as a kind of conversation are you saying that your Geography textbooks are voices in a conversation?

Emma: Yes, I am saying that textbooks, at least the better textbooks, should be treated as voices in a conversation, and this is the way teachers should use textbooks, they should get learners to get into conversation with the textbook.

Bulelwa: What rubbish! How can a textbook be a 'voice', and, in any case, what are we going to do if we don't have textbooks?

Emma: When I use the word 'voice' I don't mean only the sounds coming out of people's mouths when they speak, I mean what people say, whether they speak it or write it down. And, no, I don't mean only real textbooks – when I say 'textbook' I mean what might be in a textbook, but what also might be in the mind of the teacher – the knowledge that the teacher has.

Andile: Do you think that knowledge is 'in the mind'? Think of Doctor Khumalo, he has excellent know-ledge about how to play soccer, is his knowledge 'in his head'?

The other teachers, found this turn in the conversation very confusing, and they were glad when Yasmine started to speak:

Yasmine: Look, this is a very entertaining conversation, but I can't see how it can help us when we go back to our classrooms in a few minutes time. To think that we are going there to have 'conversations' with our students is just nonsense. The fact of

the matter is that there are facts which the kids need to learn, and it is our job to get them to learn them. When I am teaching maths there is no point in having a 'conversation' – what is there to discuss about whether $2 + 2$ is 4 or the square root of 100 is 10? To think of having a 'conversation' about things like this, is just wrong, and it might give the kids the false impression that they are entitled to think just what they like, and that they are being 'insulted' if someone tells them that what they think is incorrect. We would not be able to teach at all if we were banned from pointing out the kids' mistakes. We might as well just hand out the matric certificates when the kids arrive on the first day of the year. Let the voices be heard, indeed! Some voices do not deserve to be heard, and we would not be teaching at all if we tried to listen to the voices of the kids.

Some of the teachers sitting around were worried by what Yasmine was saying – it sounded so undemocratic – but although they agreed with her that we can't just think what we like (even Wole found himself agreeing with this) they felt that an important point was being lost. Teaching can't be simply transmitting information from one place to another, like a radio or a telephone. They had all struggled with 'passive' students who were too shy to say anything, or who refused to make an effort in the classroom to take part in what their teachers were trying to teach them – preferring to spend their time making jokes and teasing other kids in the class, or simply trying to stay out of the teachers' attention. Emma had been thinking about what the others had been saying, and as she glanced up at the clock on the wall, she suddenly understood what the problem was:

Emma: Look, Bulelwa, I can understand why you are cross with Joe about his 'theories'. Teaching is a practical business, and a lot that people sitting around in armchairs or lecture halls say about it is no help at all. But still, the pictures that we have in our heads about what teaching is make a big difference to what we do when we try to teach. Think of the differences it makes to what a teacher actually *does* if she thinks of herself as a gardener and the kids as delicate plants that need to be cultivated, or if she thinks of herself as a builder who needs to lay firm foundations, or as pot maker who needs to mould the minds of the students. Our concept of teaching shapes our practice as teachers, and this is why it is important to think about teaching. If we agree that teaching is a kind of conversation, that will make a difference to how we teach, for instance we will see that teaching is a kind of interaction between the teacher and the learners, not one-way traffic from the teacher to the learners.

But some of the things that Yasmine and Nomsa said can

remind us that if we think of teaching as a kind of conversation or interaction then it must be a particular kind of conversation or interaction. Not all our conversations can be called teaching. When Yasmine accused Wole of thinking of teaching as a 'cosy chat' she was right. Con-versations often wander about all over the place, often they do not get anywhere, and are often merely for amusement, to swop the latest scandals, or just to pass the time. And teaching can't be like this. In conversations people often don't listen carefully to what others are saying (here she glanced briefly at Joe, who was gazing in Nomsa's direction) because they are so busy showing off.

When Nomsa tried to explain what Joe was saying and she said that he was trying to show that the way we teach is connected to what we think learning and knowledge are she was giving us a clue to something special about the kind of conversation teaching is, if we think of teaching as a kind of conversation. Yasmine was on the same track when she said if we think of teaching as a conversation then we might give the kids the false impression that they can just think what they like. But then Yasmine shifted from talking about conversations and she said the word 'discuss' – she asked what there was to 'discuss' about $2 + 2$ being 4?

A 'discussion' is a special kind of conversation, and I have been thinking that it would be better if we thought of teaching as a kind of discussion. This would have the following advantages...

But just as Emma was about to go on Mr Spellman came fuming into the staffroom.

Mr Spellman: What are you all doing here sitting around and chattering? Didn't you hear the bell ring? Your lessons should already have started and you are paid a salary to teach not to lounge around here prattling to each other. Go to your classrooms this minute.

Guiltily the teachers realised that they had become so involved in the discussion that they hadn't even heard the bell – they frantically gathered up their books and papers and dashed out to teach, forgetting all about conversations and discussions.

