

Constructive Talk in Challenging Classrooms  
By Valerie Coultas, Routledge, £20.99

You can tell this book was written by someone who used to be – but is no longer – a schoolteacher. The dedication says it all: “To all the pupils I taught, and particularly those very naughty boys, who made teaching so difficult, such a challenge and such fun”.

Yes, I’ve taught my share of naughty boys (and girls) and “fun” isn’t the first word beginning with “f” that springs to mind.

On the other hand, it’s easy to plunge into a downward spiral of gloom when teaching challenging youngsters. We can lose our sense of perspective. That’s what’s useful about Valerie Coultas’s book. She reminds us that one of the temptations with our most difficult classes is to serve up a diet of worksheets and tedious tasks that give then no impunity for interaction. As she says, “It appears to be the only way to get the job done”.

Then – with huge skill and practical savvy – she addresses the issue, showing us how with even our most disbuggerous classes we need to build in structured spoken activities. In such lessons, she reminds us, “the submerged talent of so many pupils is revealed”.

And thus begins an outstanding, practical guide to how to develop our pupils’ spoken skills in lessons. Given Ofsted’s reminder in 2005 that ‘spoken language forms a constraint, a ceiling not only on the ability to comprehend but also on the ability to write, beyond which literacy cannot progress,’ it’s something no teacher can afford to ignore. (Ofsted English Review, October 2005).

What I particularly admired was the blending of research with classroom application. This is what takes it beyond a ‘tips for teachers’ tome and gives the author real authority. She advises on how teachers should speak so that pupils listen -a much neglected micro-skill of teaching; how to manage paired and group talk; drama ideas for non-specialists, plus some excellent advice on teacher training.

I went into this book sceptically. How dare another academic dish out advice to those of us in the classroom, I inwardly ranted. But I immediately warmed to the tone and content. In fact, instinct tells me that talk is one of the great untapped resources of the classroom and, used skilfully, it could prove a hugely liberating and civilising step forward across most lessons in most schools. This book helps us to see how to achieve that aim.

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