

How can children's increased participation in a collaborative learning process improve their skills in talking and writing?

Arkleston Primary School
Renfrew High School

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Introduction

The partners for Renfrewshire's Building Bridges Project are Arkleston Primary School and Renfrew High School. RHS is a non-denominational secondary school with a roll of 900 pupils. Arkleston Primary, one of four associated primary schools, has a roll of 382. Both serve the town of Renfrew, which has a variety of housing, both local authority and private. There is a strong, active cluster arrangement and an established primary /secondary liaison programme.

Starting point:

Having been selected as the two schools to represent Renfrewshire Council, our first meeting served to identify the focus of the project. Both schools were clear we wanted to build on existing liaison practice whilst implementing the current aims of each school's development plan.

For Arkleston this meant further developing collaborative learning opportunities and self/peer assessment strategies. In Renfrew High school, the focus was on raising attainment in writing at S1 and S2.

It was felt both these aims could be well met by working together to share the Critical Skills methodology already in use in many classes in Arkleston where several members of staff had been trained in this methodology. The semi-open plan nature of the school, alongside existing co-operative teaching arrangements, had facilitated the sharing of new practices. The approach had been very successful in the curricular areas of Environmental Studies and Religious Education, but was at an early stage of development in the teaching of Language.

RHS English staff were interested in the use of the collaborative learning approaches of Critical Skills, seeing many possibilities to adapt existing practices and develop opportunities for pupils to become more involved in their own learning.

The attraction was that the approach incorporated many aspects of current research into effective learning and teaching strategies.

What is the Critical Skills approach?

- * teaching skills of communication, teamwork and problem solving
- * teaching through 'challenges'
- * collaborative learning

This approach:

- * allows controlled movement
- * caters for different learning styles
- * switches on boys (without marginalising girls)
- * engages pupils in self / peer assessment
- * provides opportunities to review learning

The Critical Skills approach does not neglect the basics, but rather delivers basic skills in a very motivating way. It encourages lifelong learning by developing skills for the future:

- * communication
- * teamwork
- * problem solving
- * perseverance
- * decision making

Both sectors agreed to use this methodology to address the identified need i.e. raise attainment in Language at P7 and S2.

To meet the criteria of the Building Bridges project, we were required to agree a specific aspect of Language. We felt an area for development was to improve the quality of persuasive talk and persuasive writing and our key question emerged as:

“ How can children’s increased participation in a collaborative learning process improve their skills in talking and writing?”

Creating a classroom climate for collaborative learning

Before beginning any collaborative group work it is of paramount importance to establish a positive working environment. Class members need to have a shared sense of trust, respect for others and value within the class environment. They need to be able to work together effectively to achieve meaningful goals. As in real life, people need time to get to know one another, understand their own and each other's strengths and weaknesses and ways of working before they can collaborate together to achieve worthwhile goals. The process of community building develops a sense of belonging and responsibility to the group. They understand that their full participation is vital to being successful together.

How was this achieved?

In order to prepare a class for collaborative group work, we assigned a week solely to the community building process. This involved a range of non-curricular games designed to aid communication, peer interaction and co-operation. The games got students talking, moving around and most importantly, having fun. These allowed pupils to get to know each other in a non-competitive and relaxed environment. Research shows that the brain is most open to effective learning when in an unthreatened state. Another advantage to using games with students is that it gets them working together immediately. Later, when faced with new challenges, the students are more confident in the group situations which are integral to the process.

At this stage it was important to conduct a series of discussions aimed at formulating guidelines to working collaboratively. This included developing a framework for effective communication i.e. talking, listening and shared responsibility. Since the students took an active role in this process, a sense of accountability was fostered in the community as a whole. The guidelines were displayed prominently in the class as a visual reference for everyone. They were used by each group and regularly reinforced by the teachers. It was also important that each member of the class was aware of the location of resources such as computers, reference books and paper since the later challenges require full student participation and ownership for learning.

In a collaborative learning environment, everyone has a responsibility for the upkeep of the community.

After the process of community building had taken place the class was divided into mixed ability groups of four. These were selected by the teacher to incorporate a combination of abilities, personalities and learning styles as much as was possible.

Initial group challenge

The initial challenge was a short non-curricular task aimed at getting the pupils collaborating in order to achieve a goal within a strict deadline and with limited resources. The main purpose was for the pupils to get an impression of the group's capacity for working effectively and to understand their own strengths within the dynamics of a new group. Reflection on the relative success or failure of this initial challenge was crucial and gave great insight into a number of key elements of group work. Students had their first experience of sharing, developing and refuting ideas and also gained an understanding of time and resource management. In this instance the final product was largely irrelevant; it was the process itself which was crucial. This highlighted the skills essential in future collaborative tasks. At this point certain tools were introduced to help pupils work together. They learned about things such as quality audience and quality conversation. They were taught strategies to help them generate ideas and reach consensus.

Challenges - the key to the collaborative process

A challenge is a task which requires a group of children to work collaboratively to produce an end product - be this a talk, a formal presentation, a piece of writing, a drama, a video etc.

The challenge is designed by the teacher and has to address the following key areas:

- knowledge, as in the relevant curricular guidelines
- skills, both educational and social
- requirements of the task, together with a time limit
- need for collaboration

The annotated challenge below illustrates these points:

Based on 5 - 14 guidelines

Persuasive Talk Challenge 2

<p>Knowledge: 1. Arguments For and Against animals being used for entertainment.</p>	<p>Skills 1. Time management 2. Teamwork 3. Building an argument</p>	<p>— Critical Skills</p> <p>— Curricular Skill</p>
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Background
BBC Newsround is sending a reporter to the school to find out about children's opinions on the use of animals for entertainment, such as zoos, fox hunting, circuses, bull fighting etc

Task
In your group you must prepare a 3 - 5 minute talk giving the group's stance on the above issue:

- choose one example of where animals are used for entertainment
- read the materials and highlight important points either for or against this issue depending on your stance
- decide on the strongest points which support your stance
- prepare a talk with an introduction, main arguments and a conclusion

You have 90 minutes to complete this task

Criteria For Success
The Newsround is looking for clear, well researched and well presented arguments to represent the opinions of the young people of Renfrew.

Product Criteria

1. Your talk clearly presents your group's stance.
2. Your talk includes an introduction, persuasive arguments and a conclusion.
3. Everybody takes part in the presentation
4. Everybody speaks clearly and audibly.

Skills Criteria

1. Your group organises the tasks in order to complete the challenge on time.
2. Your group works in a safe, supportive and positive manner.

Challenge set in meaningful context

Guidance on how to tackle the challenge

Time limit necessitates collaboration

Ensures interdependence

Clear expectations of what is required of the finished product

Clear expectations of skills the children should show

A single challenge can work very effectively in its own right, but the example above is one of a series of **linked challenges** designed to ensure progression.

The benefits of our series of linked challenges

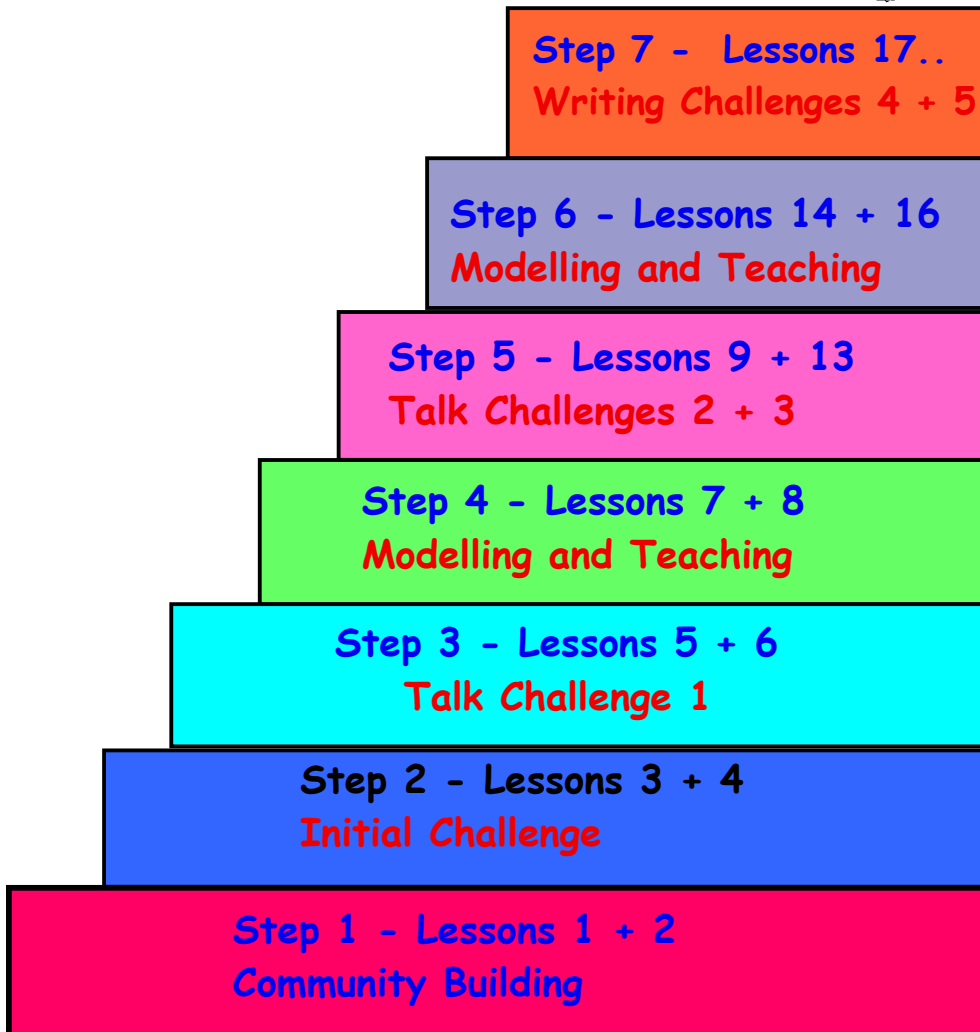
The first challenges

- focused on building children's skills in persuasive talk.
- used the group setting to provided the security for children to develop confidence

Later challenges

- incorporated the skills from the earlier challenges and introduced new skills in persuasive writing
- built on earlier strengths and addressed weaknesses
- required children to work with an increasing level of independence
- built in self and peer assessment strategies

The following Step-by-Step Guide shows exactly how our linked challenges worked.



Step	Organisation	Purpose	Observations	Evidence
Details of Step 1 are outlined in the previous section				
Step 1 Lessons 1-2 Community Building				
Step 2 Lessons 3-4 Initial Challenge	Pupils worked in mixed ability groups of 4. Within a strict time scale they had to work collaboratively to tackle a non-curricular challenge. They were given feedback on how their group worked in terms of skills. Pupils filled out self evaluation reflecting on how their group worked.	The purpose of this activity was to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce the concept of collaborative learning through a non-threatening challenge. 2. Begin to build a community within pupils' groups of 4, by providing them with a challenge to solve. 3. Through the self evaluation and feedback pupils would see areas for improvement both personally and as a group. 	Observation of pupils <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. By the end of this challenge the groups began to realise the importance of working collaboratively in their groups. 2. As expected, pupils' completed this challenge with varying degrees of success. However, the feedback and self assessment enabled us as teachers to give valuable input as to how they could improve. 3. Pupils' skills of working collaboratively varied widely and produced some surprises, notably, many of the easily distracted and disruptive boys were fully engaged in the challenge. Observation of learning and teaching <p>With the pupils tackling the challenge with very little teacher input we could take a step back and assess their initial skills of collaboration.</p>	Pupil Learning Log See Appendix A
Step 3 Lessons 5-6 Persuasive Talk Challenge 1	Pupils worked in the same mixed ability groups of 4. They were given no guidance other than	The purpose of this activity was to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To build further the pupils' skills of collaborative working. 	Observation of pupils <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Children used some of the feedback and tools (Sweep, Thumbs) discussed in the evaluation of previous challenge and were beginning to collaborate more effectively. 	Teacher Observation See Appendix B

Step	Organisation	Purpose	Observations	Evidence
Step 3 Continued	<p>that outlined on the</p> <p>acaine.</p> <p>The research resources were provided for them. Finally, groups evaluated how they had worked and the different types of people a group needed to work well.</p>	<p>2. By giving the groups a very difficult challenge to do with very little guidance it was hoped that the pupils would realise two things. Firstly, they needed each member of their group to work collaboratively in order to complete the challenge. Secondly, that they needed guidance on how to improve their persuasive talks.</p>	<p>2. Groups were gradually improving in their ability to work collaboratively. Groups were beginning to see the different roles or qualities each member of their group had</p> <p>3. Again pupils were fully engaged in the task.</p> <p>Observation of learning and teaching</p> <p>Letting the pupils "fail" by designing a difficult challenge with no guidance was very successful in creating a need in the pupils' for guidance. This enabled the teaching of the subsequent step (step 4) to become much more relevant.</p>	
Step 4 Lessons 7 + 8 Modelling leading to talk rubric Revision of talk, ranging from notetaking Structuring an argument	<p>Pupils were given a blank rubric with the criteria for a persuasive talk down to one side. The whole class looked at models of persuasive talk, ranging from poor to fantastic, on video. The pupils then worked in groups to fill in, for each specific criterion, descriptions of a poor, okay and fantastic talks in their own words.</p>	<p>The purpose of these activities was to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Involve pupils in the creating of the criteria by which they would be judged. 2. By using the pupils' own words it was hoped that they would have greater understanding of teacher expectation i.e pupils decide, with teacher input, what "good looks like" 3. Create a formative assessment tool that would form the basis for peer and self evaluation 	<p>Observation of pupils</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pupils enjoyed this activity and valued having their words and opinions used. 2. Having been given the criteria and models the pupils were able to identify all the different elements of persuasive talk rather than just focusing on delivery. <p>Observation of teaching</p> <p>Having created the "need" for guidance through the previous challenge the pupils responded well to the teaching of revision of notetaking and the structuring of arguments.</p>	<p>Blank Talk Rubric See Appendix C</p> <p>Talk Rubric Highlighted See Appendix D</p>

Step	Organisation	Purpose	Observations	Evidence
<p>Step 5 Persuasive Talk Challenges 2 and 3</p>	<p>Pupils worked in their group of 4 to prepare and present challenge</p> <p>2. As each group presented the listening groups assessed those presenting using the rubric. Separate groups giving feedback on one specific criteria each. As feedback was given, the teacher compiled an overall highlighted rubric, showing strengths and development needs, which the group used to plan their next talk.</p>	<p>The purpose of these activities was:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> To give pupils the opportunity to put into practice what they had learned during making the rubric and lessons on structuring an argument To enable the pupils to peer assess very effectively by using the rubric To highlight to the groups specific areas of their talk that they needed to work on for next time Finally, to tackle, very quickly, another challenge in which they could make the necessary improvements 	<p>Observation of pupils</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Group collaboration had further improved with the groups really seeing the need for each member of the group to work well Pupils were much more confident in what was expected of them, and referred to the rubric as a checklist. Peer assessment was extremely successful with the groups giving specific feedback on a given criteria Pupils really looked at the highlighted rubric to see where they needed to improve. Final talk challenge showed significant improvement both in quality of collaboration but also the standard of the persuasive talks. <p>Observation of teaching</p> <p>Using the rubric as a formative assessment tool was a fantastic way of helping the pupils see their next steps.</p>	<p>Teacher Observations See Appendix B</p> <p>Mid Project Interviews See Appendix E</p>
<p>Step 6 Modelling Writing Lessons 1.4 + 1.6</p>	<p>Using 3 exemplars of poor, okay and fantastic persuasive writing a rubric with specific writing criteria was created in a similar way to step 4.</p>	<p>The purpose of this activity was the same as with step 4 with a view to preparation for final individual written task.</p>	<p>Observation of pupils</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> As with the creation of the persuasive talk rubric, all pupils were actively involved and gained an understanding of the different requirements for effective persuasive writing. 	<p>Persuasive Writing Rubric See Appendix F</p>

Step	Organisation	Purpose	Observations	Evidence
Step 7 Writing Challenges Lessons 17.....	<p>Additional lesson was spent concentrating on specialised aspects of writers craft i.e. connectives and exaggeration</p> <p>For the first writing challenge pupils worked in either the same group of 4 or in pairs made up from the original group. Pupils used the writing rubric to peer assess the pieces of group writing. Groups were given an overall rubric which again showed them specific next steps. For the final challenge pupils were allowed to collaborate in their group at the planning stage but had to write their own piece of persuasive writing.</p>	<p>The purpose of these activities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The collaborative writing task was intended to develop the skills and confidence of each pupil within the supportive environment of their group. 2. The highlighted rubric that each group was given would give guidance on areas of development for the individual writing task. 3. The final individual written piece would show an improvement on prior written work for a range of abilities, done without the process of collaborative group work. 	<p>Observation of pupils</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Having gone through the process of preparing persuasive talks the pupils were quickly able to produce a well structured piece of writing. This produced a good foundation for their own work. 2. The use of the rubric gave pupils a clear understanding of which areas they needed to work on in their individual piece. 3. In tackling the individual piece of writing the pupils showed much greater confidence as well as an understanding of the requirements for this genre. 4. Having established a "community" within the groups, the pupils were comfortable and willing and able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • debate - articulate and defend their own stance • share ideas • develop their own arguments without teacher interaction • peer assess throughout the process i.e. editing spelling, punctuation and revisiting the rubric 	<p>Highlighted Writing Rubric See Appendix G</p> <p>Persuasive writing pieces from before and after the whole process See Appendix H</p>

A Case Study within a Case Study A Primary Perspective

Community Building

For the past ten years I've begun the new session in the same way, priority in the first week being the negotiation with the children of class rules and establishing good work practices. Within a couple of days I would consider myself set up for the rest of the year, I perhaps hadn't really given due consideration as to relationships within the class. Whilst always endeavouring to foster a positive class room climate I really didn't employ any strategies for developing this other than possibly relying on my own energy and enthusiasm and of course a weekly circle time.

Critical Skills training highlighted for me the need for much greater amounts of time being spent on community building and its effect on learning and teaching. I wanted, this time around, for the children to have a real sense of value, belonging and responsibility to the class. I wanted them to discuss and realise in a more meaningful way the types of strategies/behaviours that would need to be employed in order to create a harmonious and industrious atmosphere.

In agreement with my colleagues at Renfrew High, we decided that an effective way of doing this would be through a programme of games to allow the class to get into the spirit of co-operation, of working and playing together for fun.

In Arkleston there are two classes at each stage, both working within the one base and whilst the class are set in ability groups across the base in Language and Maths every other curricular areas is largely approached in register sides. So being, personal and social development activities mainly took place within their assigned register sides. My stage partner and I decided that we would set aside mornings in which to take different groups of pupils away separately for games, mixing them up regularly within the week. This served us well in disbanding any cliques which may have formed over the past six years and was a good way of splitting any inappropriate pairings and in fostering new relationships.

After initial warm-up/introductory name games we used some 'Brain Gym' energisers before beginning more games which focused on problem solving and co-operation in a variety of group situations. After completing my first 'Memory Name Game' I could recall every new pupil's name. This would normally take at least a week for me to achieve and even then I wouldn't really have gained a definitive awareness of their appearance or individual personalities. After two weeks I really felt that I knew the children very well, pupil/teacher barriers had been broken down and there was a definite sense of trust and accountability within the class. We were able then able to create a class charter that seemed more genuine than in previous years

From this stage on I was convinced that every minute of the time that had been set aside for Community Building had been worthwhile and I looked forward to the next step of and implementing the series of linked challenges which we had devised. I hoped that these would embrace the needs of all the pupils, provide them with essential life skills and above all create an environment where the pupils were encouraged to think for themselves and felt able to participate. I hoped that this approach would enhance their self-esteem, self-awareness and in turn academic achievement.

Collaborative Learning in Language

As previously outlined, Arkleston pupils had been used to working within a challenge-based approach in other areas of the curriculum predominantly in Environmental Studies and Religious Education. A few advances has been made into using this approach in Maths but not yet in Language. The pupils in our class had been set into ability groups for Language for some time and these had probably remained largely unchanged for a number of years so it was somewhat

of a surprise to the pupils when they were thrust into mixed ability groups for Language in the first term of Primary Seven. It was very interesting to observe their initial reactions. On the whole this turn around was met with some confusion. Some rather concerned children asked, "Are we still in the top group?"

Learning Support pupils remarked with interest, "Have we been moved up?"

This prompted me to ponder the affects of ability grouping for long periods of time, questioning how this might affect their attitudes to learning.

I began asking myself, 'Do the more able learners become complacent and stop striving for better quality and results'.

'Do those with support needs stop trying as they become more resigned to their difficulties?

Without exploring these quite major questions suffice it to say that forming new groups in this instance had significant impact on the children's attitudes even before we began the programme of work. For some pupils this may have been viewed as a fresh start, a new opportunity or even just a pleasant change. For others this may have been seen as a threat to their perceptions of their abilities and stature within the class. Here is where the importance of the community building process would be tested. Would it be possible for the pupils gel in new groups and to recognise and appreciate everyone's contributions in order to capitalise on their strengths and experience success?

The implications for teachers using the collaborative teaching approach

One of the significant differences for me as a teacher was the shift from direct teacher/pupil interaction to increased interaction among pupils, my role now being that of circulating around the room monitoring and helping groups. There were only a few direct teaching sessions built in to the programme. Where necessary these were short and interspersed between challenges and only inserted when new concepts had to be introduced. It was difficult initially to take a step back and allow the groups to find their own routes through the problems. It was a challenge in itself to observe groups experiencing difficulty in communicating effectively, mismanaging time and resources and ultimately, in some instances failing to meet the success criteria.

Group work in language was something I viewed as having two definitive layers:

- 1) The communication and interaction within the group (process)
- 2) The responsibility for the end goal and the acquisition of knowledge and understanding (product)

It became apparent that the process of working successfully as a group was of primary importance. It was hoped that once the children had gained the skills necessary to work as a team that they could move forward into achieving their goals in Language.

Over the series of challenges a great many changes took place within the groups. Firstly the pupils were forced to become less dependent on the teacher and had to increase their oral skills in order to interact with their peers. They began to participate equally within the groups as they began to recognise their own individual accountability. They began to assign roles and use each other's strengths. The children became better at listening to one another and in taking turns. They began to generate more information. By sharing ideas the children gained a better understanding of the task. There was a marked reduction in conflicts as groups learned to make decisions and reach consensus together. The atmosphere within the groups became calmer and more supportive. The end product became more sophisticated and complete.

Another factor of the learning process which I found very impressive, was that of the complexity of the text materials the pupils were utilising and the types of subjects tackled. With the assistance of the librarian at Renfrew High resource packs were compiled for each topic. Due to time constraints we used the same journals, books and articles, therefore the Primary pupils were stretched to reading at the top end of their comprehension abilities. I was surprised at how well

the primary groups coped with challenging texts and how they extracted key information with increasing success.

It was at this point I realised some more of the real benefits to collaborative learning within the groups in my class. The more able readers assisted the less able and encouraged them to translate the information they understood into their own simplified arguments in order to deliver them to the audience in a clearer more meaningful way. The less able learners listened more intently in order to gain information which they could use, the more able pupils being challenged to in effect - teach their peers thus reinforcing their own knowledge and understanding.

Afterwards, once all group members were clear on their main arguments and the structure and organisation of their talks, talents, personalities and humour could really take effect and in many ways a balance of responsibility and ownership was reached. The groups celebrated success through completing the challenge, performing publicly and receiving positive feedback from their peers. They also shared the burden of critique and the responsibility in making the recommended improvements for the next challenge.

Using a rubric in the challenges

As a teacher the idea of using a rubric instantly appealed to me. It had everything necessary to support the pupils through the challenges providing them with clearly listed criteria for their work and details of graduation of quality for each criterion within a simple format. The use of the rubric proved to be especially effective when it was generated collaboratively with the pupils. The rubric helped me to communicate my expectations and was a powerful tool for both learning and teaching.

Highlighting the rubric was quick and easy and additional notes regarding individuals could be added where appropriate. Also having three or four graduations of quality helped me to accommodate all abilities within my class.

I believe that the use of the rubric improved pupil performance and attainment. It enabled the pupils to monitor their own progress and showed them how to meet the expectations of the challenges. The rubrics appeared to help the pupils become more thoughtful judges of the quality of their own work and that of others. Repeated practice in the use of them throughout the linked challenges increased the pupils' sense of responsibility for their own work. For the pupils in my class the idea of peer-assessment also took a bit of getting used to. It had to be explained that this kind of assessment was intended to help everyone do better. The pupils were encouraged to be fair and accurate in their feedback and were expected to look for evidence to support their comments. Coaching in this was essential.

I feel that using the rubrics provided the pupils with more informative feedback about their strengths and areas that need improvement than traditional forms of assessment.

Primary/Secondary Liaison

For me one of the real tests of the programme's success lies in whether the use of collaborative learning is sustained among not only the teachers involved but also whether it expands to their colleagues. We began this project by inviting each other into our classrooms, watching and developing the different co-operative learning strategies and feeling for ourselves a sense of trust and security. From this we were able to discuss how to implement our new training simultaneously and productively. In working so closely together we could clearly see the benefits of collaboration within our group and provided a model for our students. We agreed on the talking and writing objectives and discussed grouping scenarios, feedback techniques and self-evaluation plans. Once the programme was underway we met regularly to compare results. We also sent observation notes via e-mail and pooled equipment and resources.

In completing this project I feel empowered as a teacher. I felt in total control of not only the design of the programme but also the implementation, assessment and evaluation. The end pieces of written work were impressive and I felt a great sense of satisfaction. I felt confident that I had made every attempt to consider how best pupils in my class could learn better. I plan to always have an open mind and reflective approach to all future ventures. I feel privileged to have had this opportunity and even feel confident enough to serve as a peer mentor for other interested teachers and to share practice with other schools.

A Secondary Perspective

The series of linked challenges had a great many benefits in terms of learning and teaching. The nature of the challenges meant that in every lesson, each member of the class was fully engaged. The short, focused nature of the challenge process was a very effective means of catching the imagination of boys who had otherwise been passive learners. They seemed to thrive on the need to work effectively under strict time pressures.

Class members who had previously been easily distracted and occasionally disruptive were kept on task by their peers and the requirements of the tasks themselves. No one wanted to be a failure in their group and this led to an increased work ethic during the challenge series.

Another obvious benefit was the short time frame in between challenges. Pupils appreciated the chance to present another talk quickly since they were given the tools required to make improvements. The rubrics used as frames for effective persuasive talks and pieces of writing were very powerful sources of self and peer assessment and allowed clear guidelines to improve and develop skills further.

Pupils were enthusiastic about the variety inherent in the challenge series. They had an active role in their learning and seemed to relish that. The process outlined already takes into account the different learning styles that are present in every class and therefore takes into account their individual strengths and preferred learning style, whether it be kinaesthetic, auditory or visual.

Attainment levels were seen to rise in a significant number of cases. The rubric afforded pupils the chance to have a very clear awareness of the requirements and strategies used to produce fantastic pieces of persuasive writing and talks. The class acquired a sophisticated knowledge of the techniques needed to succeed as collaborative learners and these are skills that will be retained for future years and are also transferable to other areas of the school curriculum.

Within the class, new relationships developed through the process and it was encouraging to see pupils, who would not normally associate with each other, achieving goals together. Overall, this meant that a very positive working climate was created. The experience was incredibly rewarding and already I am looking at ways of incorporating challenges into all areas of the curriculum between S1 and Higher.

The challenge series used in Building Bridges has become something much greater than a research project to me as a High School teacher- it has served as a vehicle to steer my teaching style towards taking a more collaborative approach to learning and teaching. By doing this, my classroom, with all its constituent elements has become a more positive and vibrant place.

Benefits of the Building Bridges Project

For teachers:

- * improved classroom climate
- * improved relationships with pupils
- * increased self motivation
- * confidence to question and change existing practice
- * confidence to hand over control to the pupils
- * formative assessment becomes an integral part of classroom

practice

- * fun

For pupils:

- * improved classroom climate
- * improved relationships with pupils
- * increased self motivation
- * opportunity to learn from and with each other
- * chance to use different learning styles
- * increased responsibility for own learning
- * clear learning intentions and success criteria
- * improved performance in persuasive talking and writing
- * development of transferable skills for future years and subject areas
- * fun!

The benefits stated above were clearly observable and therefore provided evidence to show that children's increased participation in a collaborative learning process could indeed improve their skills in a specified area.

In addition to the initial aim being met, the overall experience provided high quality primary - secondary liaison. Many of the staff involved in the project, from class teachers to senior managers, had previously experienced a variety of liaison practices. However we are unanimous in our judgement that this project surpassed all our expectations. While we saw real improvements in our specified curricular areas the overall impact was much broader.

The success of the liaison project is due to that fact that we approached the process using the same philosophies which we wanted the youngsters to use. We built a community in which the strengths of each individual were valued and where mutual trust quickly developed. This led to classroom observations where teachers focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the learning environment and were able to support and learn from each other.

In the past much primary - secondary liaison has been driven from the secondary "down" to the primary. However in this project the best of primary methodology was transferred to a vital stage of secondary education where pace and challenge had often been criticised. The results have been so encouraging that confidence in both sectors has increased.

In the primary sector the teachers see many opportunities to develop further the Language challenges.

In the secondary sector the impact to date has been in the English department where the new methodology is spreading and attainment is rising. Staff notice that new S1 pupils who have experienced this way of working in Primary are confident when faced with challenges in the English department and can lead other pupils through the process. Their enthusiasm is catching!

The Way Forward?

Having been convinced of this methodology both schools have made a commitment to train several members of staff in Critical Skills.

In addition to this there are already plans within the cluster to repeat the Building Bridges Project with all four associated primary schools. SMT in these schools will endeavour to have at least one member of staff trained.

In Renfrew High School the English staff involved are already spreading the methodology to other year groups and other aspects of English teaching. Primary and secondary staff made a presentation to interested staff in the high school to increase awareness of the shared methodology and it is envisaged that the good practice will be disseminated to other curricular areas. The possibilities are endless!

Last Words

Teachers

"I had to step out my comfort zone and rethink the methodologies I was using. It was well worth the effort. I saw pupils I knew very well working in a totally different and more meaningful way." (Secondary teacher, 20 years experience.)

"The process has allowed me to unlock potential in pupils that wouldn't otherwise have been possible using traditional methods of teaching." (Secondary teacher, 3 years experience.)

"As an ancient English teacher I have felt invigorated by working with wonderful, enthusiastic and knowledgeable colleagues and have become utterly convinced of the efficacy of collaborative learning - an idea that's been around for the 30 years of my teaching career and which I am now putting into practice with a range of classes." (Secondary teacher, 30 years experience.)

"I feel a great sense of achievement as I have been able implement a real change. I aim to sustain this methodology and expand it to other areas of the curriculum. I am keen to introduce it to my colleagues." (Primary teacher, 10 years experience.)

"The professionalism of the teachers involved has been wonderful to watch. I was delighted to observe the growth of mutual trust and free sharing of experiences. This liaison project has succeeded in the most important way i.e. making a positive and very exciting difference to what happens to pupils in classrooms." (Primary Head Teacher, 21 years experience.)

"This has been a fantastic opportunity to develop an excellent teaching methodology, share expertise and make great new friends." (Primary teacher, 6 years experience.)

Pupils

Secondary:

"I learned about myself, that I can learn from other people"

"The criteria was dead helpful. There were three different categories and you can see which one relates to you."

" You don't need to be a perfectionist all the time. It's more about what goes on behind the scenes and needing to work well with those around you. The whole process matters."

" I am a process person. I took over and did what I had to do - even at home."

" I liked how the criteria helped you to see what parts you need to work on. You could look at it and say 'I've got that, I've got that, but I need to work on that.'"

Primary:

" I was quite nervous but knowing that I had worked hard I was desperate to entertain the class."

" When you give feedback it shows the presenting group that you are listening and lets them know what they've done well and what they haven't."

" I loved presenting. I hated getting negative feedback. I'll need to learn to take criticism."

"I felt excited about the challenges because I was experiencing something new."

"When we started to work in groups I felt quite nervous as we didn't get to choose our own groups. Luckily I didn't need to worry because once we got started we mostly worked well together."

" I can use the rubric to set goals for my next activity now I know what to improve on."

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Also,

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Appendix A
Pupils' self-evaluation learning logs

QuickTime™ and a TIFF (LZW) decompressor are needed to see this picture.

Appendix B Teacher Observation of 2 Talk Challenges - S2

History

David has always been a high achiever in Talk (Level E) ; Adam has been shy and not contributed much (Level C) ; Alexander has been likely to be distracted, go off task, if not prevent the group from working effectively at all (Level B).

Challenge 2: Should smacking be banned?

Group Discussion: whilst preparing and planning the presentation

David was doing most of the work; tasks not shared out; **Alexander** had his head on desk and was talking to someone in another group; **Adam** did some reading of the resources and highlighted sections but did not offer them to **David**, who wrote up the points, made the prompt cards which he then issued to the others.

Presentation to the class

Alexander did introduction; basic and brief; mumbled, mostly inaudible as far too quiet.

David did main points: a basic number of points, not all supported by evidence; no linking; very well delivered with good voice and eye contact

Adam: did conclusion which did sum up all the points; read them; no eye contact to speak of; was audible but stumbled quite often

Duration: 1.40 minutes

Challenge 4: Should children be allowed to use mobile phones?

Group Discussion: whilst preparing and planning the presentation

All members of group discussed which points to use and what evidence, with **David** the natural but unappointed leader; **Alexander** worked hard on his agreed task and asked questions / sought help as necessary. Likewise **Adam**; all referred repeatedly to the challenge sheet and the rubric and **Adam** kept an eye on the time, checking other's progress from time to time

Teacher's assessment for Group Discussion: Adam: **E** Alexander: **E** David: **F**

Presentation to the class

Adam did introduction which included impressive and effective statistics; still a bit reliant on notes but did look at audience much more; points listed rather than linked. Intonation more natural than last time

David main points well supported by evidence; effective use of rhetorical question with pause and eye sweep for effect; used humour well at end of last point; a confident and fluent speaker;

Alexander (had been absent during the last part of the preparation of challenge) lost the plot a bit at the start; lengthy pauses as consulted prompt cards; improved eye contact and audibility towards the end.

Duration: 2.17 minutes

Teacher assessments for Solo Talk: Adam: **E** Alexander: **C/D** David: **F**

Appendix C Blank Talk Rubric

Descriptions of Poor, Okay and Fantastic completed using pupil's words after modelling

Criteria Set By Teachers Based on 5 - 14

	Poor	Okay	Fantastic
Persuasive Talk			
Points			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Plenty of points ▪ Well backed up with evidence ▪ stance 			
Sensible Structure			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Introduction ▪ Main Points ▪ Conclusion ▪ Linking between points 			
Persuasive Techniques			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rhetorical questions ▪ Repetition ▪ emotive expressive language ▪ Comparisons ▪ Relevant examples (quotes, statistics, opinion) 			
Delivery			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Confident tone ▪ Prompt cards only 			
Voice			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clear ▪ Variety of tone ▪ Variety of pace 			
Body Language			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Eye contact ▪ Use of face and hands 			