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# Introduction

## What is Talk-less Teaching?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So, to fully appreciate the wonder of strategies which do not require long periods of passive listening, let's start by putting ourselves into the shoes of the people we teach ...

The best way to do this is to consider a typical staff meeting. Now, it should be fair to assume that the agenda in these meetings is pretty important (latest test results, changes to the curriculum, health and safety, etc.), but who among us has not, at one time or another, despite their best efforts to concentrate, experienced a scenario similar to the following:

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**Chairperson:** If you look at page 4 of the document, you'll see that ... blah, blah, blah.

**Your brain:** The refreshments at meetings have really gone downhill since Janet left. I miss those little pink wafer things we always used to get ... I wonder if she used to get them from that little shop in ...

**Chairperson:** John! Did you want to mention anything about that problem?

**Your brain:** Argh! I stopped listening! What is he referring to? Think! ... No – just look pensive ... And pray that someone else chips in!

**Your mouth:** Um. No, I don't think so.

**Your brain:** Oh. My. Goodness. Now I look like a complete imbecile. [Brain continues along this line of thought for another five minutes while the chairperson continues to talk.]

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No one can deny that it's extremely easy for our minds to wander when all we're required to do is listen. Even if we know we genuinely *need* to listen. It's the same if we are given something repetitive and easy to do – our minds wander while we do it. However, get us to do something that requires us to be *active* and *mindful*, and our attention is suddenly captured.

*Try This ...*

Film a lesson. Focus the camera on the learners rather than on the teacher. Look out for elements of the learners' body language and facial expressions that indicate levels of engagement and attentiveness.

What do you notice about the levels of learner engagement when the teacher is addressing the class, compared to those when the learners are required to be actively doing something other than listening?

At which points of the lesson do you see the most yawns occurring?

While the learners are required to take in information aurally, are there any indications that some learners may not be listening or understanding?

You may have experienced the potential strain of 'sitting and listening' during staff development training. This is another common experience that we teachers share with students when we are occasionally required to be passive recipients of new learning; that is, we are required to listen to someone speak for a relatively long period of time. There are a number of reasons why we might not always get the best out of this passive listening experience and these can be directly compared to the experience of learners in our own lessons.

### **A learner's experience in a lesson**

The learner has already decided, before the lesson begins, that this topic is not relevant to them. They don't see where they would ever need this skill in later life or they may not have opted to do this subject and have written it off as a waste of time.

### **Your experience at a staff development event**

You are tempted to bring your huge pile of marking to the staff training event because you have a million-and-one things that you could be getting on with, including your corridor display, lesson planning, report writing, etc.



A learner's experience in a lesson	Your experience at a staff development event
<p>The learner is adamant that, because of what they perceive to be their particular circumstances or personal difficulties, the teacher will never be able to make the work accessible to them. Therefore, any attempts at attentive listening will be futile.</p>	<p>You feel that there is something particularly special about the subject or year group that you teach and therefore you already anticipate that a generic Teacher Development Day will never be relevant to your particular circumstance.</p>
<p>The learner believes that what their teacher has to say is just 'more of the same', and therefore they are inclined to switch off because they don't anticipate learning anything new or interesting.</p>	<p>You are an experienced teacher and are convinced that you have heard it all before because 'initiatives in schools always come round full circle every few years'.</p>
<p>The learner listens attentively but just doesn't 'get it'. Since the teacher is unaware of their misconceptions, the learner leaves the lesson in a state of confusion and despair.</p>	<p>You leave a Teacher Development Day about 'The Quality of Teacher-Talk', feeling confused and outraged that you must now conduct all your lessons through mime!</p>
<p>The learner has every intention of taking in new information through the art of careful listening, but they are distracted by the behaviour of another learner.</p>	<p>You try valiantly to take in what the speaker is saying and take relevant notes, but you are constantly distracted by the colleague next to you who wants to tell you about their recent meeting with the deputy principal.</p>

### A learner's experience in a lesson

The very able learner is naturally curious and their brain is generating umpteen questions as the teacher talks, but they have no opportunity to pursue these lines of enquiry further. Their hunger for clarification and elaboration is unmet, and they feel restless and thwarted by the situation.



### Your experience at a staff development event

You have 'jiggling leg syndrome' and are restless from the moment you sit down because you have a hundred questions you'd like to ask, and points you'd like to make, but the speaker is not allowing any opportunities for you to do this.

While it is clear to see how a lot of passive listening can automatically impede progress and frustrate the learner, it is also worth pointing out that learners will sometimes *prefer* to be passive if they possibly can. Many teachers will be familiar with teenagers who exclaim: 'Sir, can you just *tell* us the information we need to know and we'll take notes? We don't want to have to *do* anything!' Of course, these teenagers would prefer to take the easy route, the passive route, the route that requires them to do no thinking whatsoever. It's a perfectly understandable human reaction. Let's be honest, many of us may at some point have headed off to a professional development course thinking, 'I hope it's not the kind of course where I'll have to *do* stuff ... I hope I'll just be able to go unnoticed and have a relatively relaxing day!'

What we need to remember in this scenario is that while some of our learners might prefer to be passive in every lesson, it is important that we don't allow them to dictate to us how we teach. As the educational experts, we know that if they sit passively taking notes, do little thinking for themselves, ask no questions and make no attempts to develop their learning further or challenge themselves, then it is highly unlikely that they will achieve their potential – not just in the upcoming exam, but in life too! Similarly, a class full of 4- and 5-year-olds can frequently be beside themselves with excitement at the prospect of watching a film in their lesson, but this does not mean that they will learn more from sitting passively watching a TV screen than they will from role-playing, enquiring and actively investigating.

It's no secret that human beings learn and embed their learning most successfully by *doing* and being *actively involved* in their learning. We have only to take the example of learning to cook. If we had never cooked before and someone were to sit and tell us how to prepare a Sunday roast, it would be very difficult to replicate what we had just been



told, and even harder to remember it the next day. However, if we were allowed to *experiment*, *discover* for ourselves what worked and what didn't, *discuss* things as we went along, *collaborate*, *watch* and *do*, then we are likely to be able to produce increasingly tasty roast dinners for years to come. Learners can achieve their absolute best in this way – if we expect it of them, believe in them and persevere.

**To put it bluntly, learning delivered primarily through teacher-talk is often the easiest option for both learners and teachers. It usually requires the least planning (assuming the teacher's subject knowledge is good) and it releases learners from an obligation to think, practise and explore.**

It's hardly surprising then that, with so much work to get through, the busy teacher can often find themselves over-relying on teacher-talk as the quickest way to impart learning. However, as your car's sat-nav sometimes fails to realise, the shortest route is not always the best route – especially when there are roadblocks and gaps in the road ahead.

Our anxiety to 'get through the syllabus' is usually the overriding reason why our automatic talk buttons get stuck in the 'on' position. It is a widely accepted notion that students' success can be measured by their performance in standardised tests and exams, and so, by extension, the competence of their teachers can be similarly assessed. When there is a whole lot of crucial content to cover, our default method for conveying information and skills to our learners is to talk ... and talk ... and talk. It's a natural human instinct: what do most of us do when we're anxious or under pressure? We talk – ten to the dozen. And, let's face it, we teachers are under huge amounts of pressure most of the time.

How many times have you heard inspirational and innovative colleagues lament the fact that they 'simply don't have time to use creative or engaging teaching strategies any more because there just isn't room in the syllabus to make the learning enjoyable'? There is a pervasive notion that vast amounts of test-related information must be transferred or 'uploaded' from teacher to learner, and that the best way to effect this transfer is through the power of talk. Any alternative method would amount to 'stopping' and wasting time in an already tight schedule.

So, the commonly experienced 'lecture laryngitis' that results from talking too much to our classes isn't necessarily a sign of an uninspiring teacher who doesn't care about making learning intriguing and exciting. In fact, it is far more likely, we believe, to be a symptom of that understandable fear that if we talk *less* in lessons, it will be impossible to get across all the vital information needed by learners to succeed.

Of course, most teachers acknowledge that didactic, lecture-style teaching fosters a culture of passivity in learners, where learners come to expect to have learning ‘fed’ to them – to be told the answers, rather than taught the skills to discover the answers themselves or even consider the possibility of alternative answers. However, despite active, independent learning being an unarguably worthy concept in itself, we can still feel that we’re stuck in an impossible bind between, on the one hand, building independent learning skills, and on the other, cramming the content necessary to get the results on which we (and our learners) are ultimately judged. The upshot? We are still at risk of allowing lessons to be dominated by the sound of our own voices.

Most teachers have experienced that utter sense of exhaustion that can descend at the end of a busy day in the classroom – that moment when the last learner exits the room and we sink dejectedly into our chair, nursing a sore throat. It’s a moment that should be filled with a warm feeling of satisfaction for a job well done, but often the overriding thought that creeps naggingly into our brain is: ‘Hold on ... did I just do almost *all* of the work back there? Did I just bust a gut for a whole hour only to get my students to do a tiny bit of work?’ This realisation is then usually followed by a further insidious thought: ‘What if it turns out that some of them only *looked* like they were listening? What if I take their books in and it turns out I just wasted all that time?’

**It will sometimes be necessary for learners to be passive recipients of their learning, but if they come to expect their schooling to take this form on a daily basis then they will become experts in the takeaway approach and never aspire to *MasterChef* status.**

The sad fact is that most of us will, at certain points in our career, have uttered something similar to the following:

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‘No, Jemima, I will not draw the people for you just because you say you’re “rubbish at drawing”.’

‘Daniel, why didn’t you just ask for a pen instead of sitting there doing nothing?’

‘Sophie, if you and Letitia really didn’t understand, you could have asked for help, rather than chatting about boy bands.’