‘We know what we’re talking about, don’t we?’
An examination of girls’ classroom-based learning allegiances

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Abstract

This paper presents data collected from small discussion groups in English classrooms. The project from which this research is taken examines the processes of pupils’ learning through talk-related activities and contributes to debates about boys’ relative under-achievement in comparison to girls. Although the project as a whole looked at the discussions of male and female pupils, here the focus is on data taken exclusively from all female groups. It explores the strategies girls used to learn, collaborate, maintain friendships and affirm group solidarity. I argue that the manner in which pupils created a sense of unity through their language, moved them together in a joint process of learning. The maintenance of amicable relationships seemed to be crucial to the process of learning support. I argue that this feature of girls’ talk might connect with their academic success.

Keywords: Girls’ friendships; Classroom talk; Discourse analysis; Achievement; Gender; Learning

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the relationship between gendered language use and female achievement in schools. Drawing on data collected from classrooms, it shows a process whereby girls extend their friendship bonds and form ‘co-operative learning allegiances’.
1.1. Girls on top

In both the UK and beyond, concerned rhetoric about boys’ trailing academic position (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Department for Education and Employment, 1997; McMillian, 2003; Murphy & Gipps 1996) compared to girls has raged, with vociferous calls to action (Office for Standards in Education, 1993; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998). Under the auspices of democratic equity, mainstream thinking assumes that correct ‘delivery’ of appropriate educational programmes should ensure all students meet specified targets (Department for Education and Skills, 2001, 2002), something that is indeed a moot point (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001). Arguing in a pro-feminist way, that ‘after boys’ issues have almost crowded out girls from gender policies’ (Hayes & Lingard, 2003, p. 1), some academics describe a simplistic and dangerous over-concentration on boys as victims, as being to the detriment of both boys and girls (Hayes, 2003; Mills, 2003).

This paper attempts to join those who wish to redress the balance of worries about boys’ trailing position, with their ‘backlash blockbusters’ (Mills, 2003, p. 1) and instead provides empirical evidence of aspects of girls’ learning styles. It redresses the balance of focus, not just by shifting the lens to girls, but also in its regard for the intricacies of learning processes. Rather than focussing on macro issues such as curriculum policy, this work considers the process of talk and learning and the ways in which this process connects with identity issues. In identifying specific features as present in girls’ discursive practices I do not argue that boys have no ability to articulate themselves in these ways, rather that I found some linguistic characteristics were far more prevalent in girls’ discussion groups than in boys’. These features frequently seemed to contribute to an atmosphere conducive to collaborative learning.

Whilst individual pupils belong to a whole range of social groupings, they nevertheless seem uniformly keen to signal gender allegiances to each other, often upholding monolithic notions of gender in seeming defiance of contemporary exhortations for equity. To err from common behaviour patterns and break rules of gendered conduct means that boys’ lives in particular can become very difficult (Connell, 1995, 1996; Corson, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Many boys fall victim to overt macho ‘policing procedures’ (Connell, 1996), for example. It is my contention in this paper that many girls’ gendered social and linguistic practices advantage their learning, reaping both academic and social benefits.

1.2. Talk and learning

Most academic assessment focuses on written outcomes; here, however, I focus on classroom processes of learning, specifically interaction in the small group discussion.

Building on a Vygotskian model (Vygotsky, 1986) researchers have argued that when children are given opportunities to talk, learning is facilitated by each child’s personal engagement with the topic and with each other (Edwards & Mercer, 1987). Within the small group, classroom learners can test out ideas and words with each other in a supportive manner, thus it is in this arena that I have focused my attention. In the English classroom pedagogical practices best build on this theory through setting up small group discussion tasks and, for example, Directed Activities Related to Texts (DARTs; Lunz & Gardener, 1979); role-play discussions; collaborative writing tasks, for example. These were the kinds of tasks from which I drew my data.
1.3. Learning allegiances

In this paper, I provide details of the ways in which some girls use talk to establish secure friendship environments, which facilitate co-operation. I show how, in the course of their task-based discussions, girls’ friendships are maintained and developed in manners which promote learning. I do not make the claim that girls only have cordial relationships or that their relationships lack complexity. Nevertheless I do argue that the features I found most common among the groups of girls in my study (from a sample of approximately 100 pupils), showed girls predominantly working in ways which facilitated collaborative learning. Rather than seeking to display moments of girls’ genius, or other flashpoints in the classroom setting, it focused on the mundane and sought for evidence in girls’ discourse strategies that might account for their higher achievement in school. I found that cordial learning networks were built, providing an arena which supported linguistic experimentation, idea development and learning generally.

I have looked for ‘patterns of semiotic cues’ (Wortham, 2001, p. 255) and these I have interpreted as reflecting prevalent ways in which the girls demonstrated allegiances to each other through their use of language. I have focussed on constructs and patterns which have recurred. Although other researchers have evidenced boys using language more influentially than girls (Pavlidou, 2003; Spender & Sarah, 1980), the girls’ whose smaller group discussions I investigated repeatedly demonstrated influence, wit and dynamism.

2. Methodology: data collection

The data upon which this paper is based was collected as part of a wider study involving three mixed sex non-selective secondary schools in the north of England. Fourteen-year old pupils were audio recorded while carrying out curriculum tasks in small groups. The tapes were transcribed using an adaptation of Coates’ (1996) conventions—see Appendix A. Pupils, their parents and teachers gave permission for transcriptions of recordings to be made; pseudonyms are used throughout. Pupils worked on a number of tasks towards a range of curriculum goals.

2.1. Analytical framework

Here, with the focus exclusively on girls, using Discourse Analysis techniques (Cameron, 2001; Coates, 1996; Eggins & Slade, 1997; Goodwin, 1998) I show the potency of girls’ talk amongst themselves, highlighting how they managed and developed their friendships along congruent lines with their management of curriculum work. I have been consciously eclectic in my approach, including some narrative analysis as well as some critical discourse analysis and drawn on approaches to the study of face-to-face interaction developed within the field of Language and Gender. My choices have been directed by my determination to understand the processes in the classroom, where girls’ talk has seemed to be beneficial in terms of their learning relationships.

The extent to which individuals lead gendered lives is varied (Connell, 1996; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998), and it has been demonstrated that there is an element of
choice as to how far individuals perform gender in particular circumstances (Eckert & Ginet, 1995; Goodwin, 1998). Certainly many of my subjects demonstrated variety in their performances, changing according to linguistic context, for example, responding in different ways to collaborative poetry composition and comprehension, role play, problem solving or relating personal narratives. Nevertheless I noted persistent trends that demarcated boys’ performances from those of girls’. These trends appear to support a concept explored by Paechter (2003), relating to communities of practice and the construction of masculinities and femininities. Paechter usefully draws on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) showing how their conceptualisation of learning through participation in communities also characterises the learning of particular forms of gender practices. It is persistent trends in girls’ discourse practices which are described in this paper and which reflect their membership of a gendered discourse community. Whilst I witnessed aspects of boys’ discussions which showed their ability to use the discourse strategies I describe here as occurring frequently in girls’ groups, nevertheless, the boys used these in a less sustained way. Frequently a minority of boys inhibited collaborative work and subverted the sustained use of the discourse strategies described here (Davies, 1998, 2003). These boys may have performed differently in different contexts.

The data for this paper, being derived from classrooms, differs from ‘naturally occurring speech’ since pupils were requested to talk about specific topics; they were aware their talk was being monitored and assessed (even beyond the purpose of this research) and their discussions were time limited by the teacher. Thus, the analysis describes the language of these 14-year olds in this particular classroom situation and my conclusions refer only to this context.

2.2. Polyphony

Adopting Bakhtin’s (1984) term, Coates (1996) uses the concept of ‘polyphony’ to describe the way in which women friends often speak as ‘one voice’, relegating personal prowess to minor moments in their discussions, thus celebrating group achievement. This concept proved useful in my analysis since it encompassed the broad range of textual features contributing to the grammatical and semantic cohesion of the girls’ discussions. Whilst some individuals enjoyed their achievements being highlighted from time to time, in general the girls tended to emphasise the importance of the group’s unity.

Friendship talk has been found to play a crucial role in the lives of many women and girls and it has convincingly been argued that for female friends, talk plays a central role (Coates, 1996). Previous research about female friendships and discourse styles (Coates, 1996; Goodwin, 1998; Hey, 1997; Maybin, 1997; Sheldon, 1997) have been used to frame my thoughts on the way the girls in my data have related to each other. Even when not specifically required, personal disclosures were common, allowing friendships to be maintained as part of the working process; the re-evaluation of past events and old knowledge often were used to formulate new understandings. Demonstrations of allegiance were often fore grounded; this sense of friendship development through work meant that a sense of solidarity was achieved. Wenger talks of ‘Communities of Practice’ and a social theory of learning, describing a ‘process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities’ (Wenger, 1998,
I found that underpinning so many of the girls’ discussions was an articulation, or construction of a shared valued system. I would argue that many of the girls had developed a constructive shared ‘Community of Practice’, which supported their learning.

2.3. Double-voicing

I have noted above that girls’ talk was ‘polyphonous’; their language cohered well and pupils spoke often as ‘one voice’ (Coates, 1996, p. 133). However, this did not mean that there were never differences of opinion. In order to disagree, pupils sought to do so without breaking the spell of fellowship, accentuating links, rather than areas of dissent. Sheldon (1997, p. 228), developing a concept from Bakhtin (1981, p. 324) uses the term ‘double voiced discourse’ to describe a process allowing the pursuance of goals entailing a speaker, to not only argue an opposing view, but to navigate an argument through the waters of a friendship and solidarity-based group. Bakhtin similarly uses the term to describe a narrative voice which serves ‘two speakers at the same time, expressing simultaneously two different intentions’ (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 324). For a speaker to “double voice”, she is able to both express her view, whilst also accommodating an opposing opinion. Sheldon argues that it is a discourse style that is more complex than single voicing since it requires the negotiation and maintenance of relationships whilst also challenging the culture of agreement. In looking for trends in the data, I found recurring examples of double voiced discourse in girls’ groups, contributing to the polyphonous texture.

2.4. Inclusivity

Drawing on evidence taken from ethnographic studies of children at play in public places and focusing on how children direct each other in games, Goodwin’s work (1998) emphasises the choices speakers make. She shows girls habitually using inclusive directives as proposals (‘Let’s go’; ‘Let’s look’, etc, Goodwin, 1998, p. 129), yet nevertheless being capable of more direct and coercive styles when the situation requires. This skill of being assertive, yet inclusive, was again one which I noticed as prevalent in girls’ talk; this feature gave a very positive feel to discourses even where there was disagreement.

3. Analysis

Below I analyse excerpts selected from girls’ discussions in order to demonstrate those polyphonous features which seemed to characterise their work and to show those aspects which seemed to make them successful in the tasks set. Whilst these features (including double voicing, inclusive directives, collaborative narratives and grammatical cohesion across turns), could also be found in boys’ discussions, these were more sustained in girls’ discussions, with other features being more prominent in those of boys’ (Davies, 2003).

3.1. Establishing a group learning identity

One of the tasks required pupils to reflect on their school lives and, as a prelude to some personal writing, to consider times which had been difficult for them in some way. Many of
the girls’ groups discussed their experiences at great length and in this first example, Bel and Lou described they had sometimes been made to feel academically inadequate. The girls were mutually supportive, collaborating through a narrative and building supportive allegiances. I use this short episode in order to demonstrate three things: firstly the way in which these girls collaboratively shaped a narrative and thus emphasised their unity; secondly, the ways in which the girls supported each other was achieved partly by signifying their difference from others; thirdly, that the girls’ anti-teacher talk nonetheless embraced mainstream values of education. This is a complex stretch, where girls overtly criticise a teacher, yet in a co-construction of group identity, reassure themselves of their worth as learners.

In Plate 1, the girls identified science and maths as problematic because they lacked confidence in these areas; they felt that they were not learning despite their notion, ‘but we’re not thick’ (line 123). The girls reassured each other, determining their self worth and their abilities; underlying the discussion rests the proposition, they actually do all wish to succeed and to learn, that they are united in this against all the odds—as they see it—of poor teaching.

Plate 1. A bad day—sausage rolls and enzymes.

113.    Bel  If you've got really hard work like us two in maths. /
114.    Ros  Yeah /
115.    Bel  And you just - / and you – and you - /
116.    Lou  you just can’t be bothered to do it - /
117.    Bel  and you are having a bad DAY /
118.    Jan  And you can’t do anything hard / he just doesn’t explain it to you / and 

then when you put your hand up and he goes to other people =
119.    Lou  =You’re having a bad day / you’ve got hard work / and you get upset 

with yourself and every teacher just - /
120.    Ros  and teachers don't explain it to you /
121.    Lou  I know . / and then when you put your hand up and they go to other 

people / and you think oh well - /
122.    Jan  And it damages your work / /
123.    Bel  You look around and everyone is doing their work and you are like are 

we THICK? / I sit in the house and think / are we thick? / but we’re not 

thick / we’re not - /
124.    Lou  No / it’s just like - /
125.    Jan  Well it’s the same as like when we have Mr. Lord isn't it? /
126. Ali yeah because there is always me and her - / well -

127. Lou Mr. Lord isn’t helpful at all /

128. Jan Mr. Lord is awful he doesn’t explain anything at all / and when we ask for help / he’ll just like ignore us won’t he? /

129. Ali He doesn’t help us /

130. Jan Because to be honest we talk a lot like / but - /

131. Ali but we do listen /

132. Jan but we do listen /

133. Ali Yeah but what’s point in listening all the time anyway? / because we don’t understand him /

134. Jan Yeah so then when he goes on about something else (.) / we don’t understand what he’s on about /

135. Lou What were he on about other week? / right . other week - /

136. Jan Cos we don’t know what he’s been talking about before /

137. Lou What were he on about other week? / FOOD / he were on about sausage rolls and enzymes and all that lot /

138. Bel Oh yeah? /

139. Jan Yeah /

140. Lou Weren’t it? / and I goes what are we talking about FOOD for? / and he goes / I’ll tell you in a minute / and then about (.)

141. Jan Yeah <laughs>

142. Lou not even a minute later <laughs> he said something about WASHING POWDER / (.)

143. Bel <laughs>

144. Lou and I didn’t know what he were ON ABOUT / and he wouldn’t explain it to us would he? / <intonation rising to high pitch>

145. Jan No . no /

146. Lou I’m going what are you talking about washing powder for? / <intonation rising to high pitch>

147. Ali It don’t make sense does it? /

148. Jan For the record Mr. Lord is not a very good teacher / (.) and should be FIRED / (.)

149. Lou <laughs>

Bel <laughs>

Ali <laughs>

150. Jan and we ALL agree /

Plate 1. (Continued).
The girls seemed ostensibly to be rejecting school values and to be resistant to the science teacher’s attempts to involve them in the lesson. The tale fits the classic Labov and Waletzsky narrative structure (1967), with the initial abstract declaring how the story should be interpreted, jointly given in lines 113–123; that this is a tale of the girls having a ‘bad day’ because of teachers who ‘don’t explain’. In this part, the generalised pronoun ‘you’ was used, clearly signalling this is a common problem, while within stave 123, the pronoun was used first in this general way, and then switched dramatically to the specific, ‘I’, then ‘we’. This began the ‘orientation’ section, with the girls moving to focus on a specific science lesson and then describing a ‘complicating action’ where the lesson was used as a case study and the narrative moved through a series of events. In the ‘coda’ the meaning of the story was briefly re-stated (line 147) ‘it don’t make sense does it?’ and the evaluation that the teacher is not a good one. This common narrative format was jointly used by the girls to help them structure an account with a familiar syntactical logic and coherence, managing to present, quite skilfully, a view which unites them all. The way in which the girls colluded not only in the moral emphasis of the tale, but also in the structure, reveals a preparedness to work together and to speak authentically as one voice.

Bel’s story began with a description of her insecurity in not understanding maths. Her friends were supportive of this, ‘mirroring’ or ‘balancing’ her experiences with descriptions of their own (Coates, 1996, p. 61) elaborating on Bel’s initial assertion that sometimes one just has ‘a bad day’. They built on her statement by adopting her grammatical structure and added details usually employing ‘and you + adverbial phrase’ (staves 115–122), e.g. ‘and you are having a bad DA Y’ and ‘And you can’t do anything hard’. This parallelism in the grammatical structure gives textual coherence, a sense of concord both syntactically as well as semantically.

The girls passed the narrative to and fro, developing an argument progressively creating a picture of the difficulties they shared. Bel’s turn at stave 123 emphasises the way her story had moved from a personal narrative to one which included the whole group. She began with a generalised ‘you’, moved to a depiction of herself, ‘I sit in the house and think’, but finally asked the question in an inclusive way, ‘are we thick?’ this time using not the first person pronoun, but the inclusive plural ‘we’. As Pennycook (1994, p. 175) describes; “we” is both ‘a pronoun of solidarity and of rejection’ and the girls delinate themselves here as sharing oppositional values to those of ‘ineffective’ teachers. The girls had worked together and woven their experiences in a linguistic web culminating in the formation of a joint identity where experience sharing was symbolised through their language.

The linking element between Bel’s story and Lou’s comprised a series of echoing musings, shared phrases and rhetorical questions, leading to expansion on this theme from Lou, followed by Ali and Jan on staves 128–135. The opening statement described the whole point of the story in a proposition with which all girls agreed, ‘Mr. Lord is not helpful at all’. A discourse had been constructed whereby the teacher was seen as oppositional to the pupils’ learning. It was made clear that he is not worth listening to—even though they declare that they actually do listen!

Lou’s comic story caricatured a teacher unable to perceive his pupils’ needs. The girls conspired in the creation of this simplistic vignette, emphatically told, ending with the
hyperbolic and ironic conclusion that Mr. Lord ‘should be FIRED’! There is nevertheless a positive feel to the narrative, with a high proportion of minimal responses to confirm the truth of Lou’s words, as well as the use of well-timed laughter which constituted actual turns in the dialogue at points 149 and 143.

In order to assist her efforts at creating a sense of concord, Lou used a range of questions within her discourse. This had the effect of providing an interactive arena and a feeling of involvement in the construction of meaning. For example, Lou used tag questions to elicit positive responses at points 128 (‘he’ll just ignore us won’t he?’) and 144 (‘and he wouldn’t explain it to us would he?’) and thus elicited agreement. Moreover, in using the device of questions, she led the other pupils into an interactive process but also skillfully posed questions to entice her audience to listen to her further in anticipation of replies—for the questions she asks can sometimes only be answered by herself. (What were he on about other week? FOOD he were on about sausage rolls and enzymes and all that lot!)

A sense of immediacy is conveyed in Lou’s story because of the use of reported speech, but also through her use of the present mood at staves 140 and 146 in: ‘and I goes’ and ‘and he goes’ (stave 140) ‘I’m going’ (146). This is interspersed with the use of the past tense, told in a colloquial fashion, using non-standard forms such as in stave 144, ‘I didn’t know what he were ON ABOUT’. The effect of this use of the past tense in the coda, was to firmly root the commentary in the girls’ sane and present world, placing Mr. Lord at arms length, as it were, outside their immediate community.

The impact of this story is revealed in Lou’s conveyance of utter amazement which in her lively construction of Mr. Lord as a bizarre figure. Through reporting his speech firstly about food and using the apparently incongruous lexical juxtaposition of domestic lexicon against scientific terms (‘sausage rolls’, ‘washing powder’ versus ‘enzymes’) she presumably edited out a whole chunk of his explanation, thus delineating Mr. Lord as an opposition to the relative sanity of the girls’ world. In this way the girls maintained their construction of themselves as able, willing learners whose efforts are not adequately met by the teacher.

They depicted themselves not as rebellious of the school system; rather, they narrate a tale of their desire to achieve academically, yet being met with opposition from someone who is supposed to help. Thus, the girls moved from a series of reciprocal story telling where they reveal certain academic insecurities, to a revelation of group strength, and an interest in academic success, built on their own terms. In her work looking at women’s talk, Coates describes a feature she depicts as ‘backstage talk’ which ‘allows women to support each other in challenging or subverting frontstage norms, and in exploring alternative selves’ (Coates, 1999, p. 77). This strategy is similarly used by these much younger female interactants, participating in what seems to be an empowering process.

Ali’s final question assumed and expressed everybody’s incomprehension ‘It don’t make sense does it?’ This was a fine way to demonstrate Bel’s earlier assertion ‘but we’re not thick’, for indeed the rest of the world had been seen as haywire, while the group remained in splendid isolation as an oasis of reason. The final line of this episode, ‘and we ALL agree’, confirmed explicitly the unanimity of the group which had been implicitly expressed through linguistic structures.

As I had seen during the course of this project, in other discussions about shared early schooldays and about visits to each other’s houses, as well as the ability to re-tell childhood
anecdotes together, the girls’ sense of their own group was strong. At times they indicated that they were a group of individuals who not only shared values, but that these values were something to celebrate as on stave 232, ‘As you can guess we are the best group in the class’. Within this statement the girls share the view that they uniformly desire to be the best, to be assessed as successful.

In many tasks as above, girls devoted time to storytelling. As Maybin says, this technique allows a:

revisiting . . . (of) issues in different stories and exchanges from different perspectives. Thus the recursive and iterative process of collaborative meaning-making between children is carried on at three inter-related levels: through the dialogues they reconstruct within stories, through the conversational exchanges from which the stories emerge and through the ‘long conversations’ across space and time. (Maybin, 1997, p. 48)

The jointly narrated anecdote, which melded together a number of experiences, used not just the voices of those present, but also, in double voicing, the reported speech of Mr Lord. The anecdote forms one of a chain the girls related to each other about their teachers and how they evaluate them. The way in which these pupils repeatedly told stories together, emphasised their sense of being one group, not only in the way they shared the telling, but through the ways in which they sought to mirror each other’s experiences through those stories. These girls used a range of devices to bring their narratives alive demonstrating a point through them. In concentrating on their construction of friendship they marginalised dissimilarities and demonstrated through their narrative, shared beliefs about teachers, a fundamental acceptance of school-based learning, and the importance of their friendships as central to their school lives. In this way they worked as a Community of Practice clarifying their values through an interpretation of events as well as in making it clear who were insiders or outsiders to the group. Moreover, they had jointly articulated values about preferred ways of teaching and learning.

Girls’ groups facilitated a climate whereby speakers could experiment with language in ways in which their face (Goffman, 1967; Holmes, 1995) was not threatened. The collaborative nature of their fun allowed sharing to take place and in this way they exchanged reflections about their own naïveté and cemented their similarities with each other, for example, in a poetry comprehension task (Plate 2) based on Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’. In this example, the pupils take a moment to discuss the vocabulary of the poem, since it had caused a major misunderstanding for one of the girls.

The pupils were keen to make the play with words a collaborative exercise and encouraged everybody to share their delight in the language. They expressed enjoyment of poetry and showed an independent satisfaction out of an interdependent linguistic environment in the above ways. Expression of unself-conscious enthusiasm was marked with girls seeming secure with each other, even speaking in a stream of consciousness way, beginning with an idea, sometimes rejecting it themselves and able to make quite naïve and revealing statements without fear of ridicule or losing face. Indeed Laura seemed keen to depict herself as a ridiculous figure. The girls discussed their own behaviour as if it were exceeding the bounds of classroom propriety, yet nevertheless taking pleasure in applying limits to their fun (stave 252).
Plate 2. A pair of shalottes.

3.2. Accommodating dissent

I have argued that whilst the texts were polyphonous in nature, at some points the speakers acknowledged and challenged alternative viewpoints. Whilst maintaining learning allegiances which continued to follow congruent lines with group friendships, these challenges were not crises but were accommodated within the discourse in a smooth manner, often as examples of double voicing (Sheldon, 1997). In Plate 3, I show girls who struggled with a question that asked them to interpret the nature of the curse put upon The Lady of Shalott in Tennyson’s poem.

The girls employed a range of strategies to try and crack the poetic code through asking questions, on staves 142, 147, 148 and 160, for example. The pupils sought support from each other, tentatively interrogating their own and each other’s understandings, trying to find endorsement for their own assertions. The girls were confident enough to seek support from each other and to admit to their own comprehension problems. However, this was not a mere delegation of responsibility, they conjectured suggestions and often focused intently on the text as in staves 141 and 142. Here in this example of double voicing, Julie accommodates Lisa’s words within her own utterance (‘It says . . . + mirror’ validating the contribution at the same time as rejecting it. Nevertheless, this is swiftly followed by two interrogatives which underscore Julie’s own uncertainty, and equal puzzlement. This technique allowed the group to focus together, even though at this point they had no agreement about interpretation. They also conjectured solutions which might help from beyond the text with Lisa at one point drawing on her knowledge of superstition, ‘seven years bad luck for breaking a mirror’).

Disagreements were low key for the girls hedged their words with modalities such as through the use of ‘may’, ‘might’ and ‘perhaps’. No individual put herself forward as an expert here and the similarity of discourse style lent emphasis to the fact that they felt a joint responsibility for resolving the problem. The parallelism in the grammatical structure, the minimal responses, the tentativeness betrayed through the questions and hedges all
139. Cath Well it doesn’t - = /
140. Julie Well no we don’t know what the curse is but we - /
141. Lisa It says the mirror breaks = /
142. Julie It says something about the crystal mirror - / so it doesn’t - / does she
LIKE er this what’s his name? Lancelot is it? /
143. Lisa Yes er I think she likes him /
144. Julie Yeah /
145. Lisa Yeah I think she likes him but the mirror cracks /
146. Cath Yeah /
147. Lisa So do you think that’s the curse? / Yeah /
148. Julie So the curse is that? /
149. Lisa Yeah / the mirror cracks /
150. Emma No the curse is before the mirror cracks so er /
151. Lisa No but look it says the mirror cracked from side to side so - =/
152. Julie And that is the curse then? /
153. Cath But it wasn’t in the mirror then = /
154. Lisa That must be erm (.) /
155. Julie The mirror’s cracked and she can see him in the mirror /
156. Emma We’re not on part four - / part three yet / we’re only on part two /
<laughs> /
157. Cath I don’t know /
158. Julie And then it says what are the images reflected in the mirror? = /
159. Emma It’s just that everything that is going on behind her = /
160. Lisa But why does she get a curse on her? / Because she won’t leave? / It
might be because she won’t leave - (.)
161. Cath Yeah it might be then yeah / I don’t know / (.)

Plate 3. The curse.
reinforced a shared perspective and unanimous valuing of the contributions of others. The way in which the discourse was structured left all interlocutors free to add phrases and words. Thus, the structure of their language facilitated the incremental addition of clauses and the development of a deliberation together.

In such moments the girls’ groups revealed the value to be found in collaborative learning. As Maybin describes, ‘Talk is not a transparent conduit through which knowledge is passed, but an integral part of how understanding is collaboratively accomplished’ (Maybin, 1994, p. 132). The ability to produce this kind of language essentially liberated speakers from individual responsibility; a linguistic rapport was achieved so that it would have been difficult to trace ideas back to their originators because the embellishment of initial clauses was a free-for-all and democratic process. The predisposition to seek agreement was very strong and when the girls debated which century Tennyson’s ballad is set, they made a series of tentative suggestions (Plate 4).

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75. Julie  The nineteenth century /
76. Lisa   Probably /
77. Emma  I wouldn’t think so /
78. Cath  It’s like knights in shining armour /
79. Julie  Late eighteenth early nineteenth? /
80. Cath  No /
       Emma  No ( ) way ( ) way before that /
81. Cath  Sixteenth? /
82. Julie  Sixteenth? /
83. Emma  Fourteenth or fifteenth century = /
84. Cath  Or maybe thirteenth /
85. Julie  No not thirteenth I don’t think so /
86. Cath  Probably fourteenth? Or there abouts then? /
87. Julie  Thirteenth /
88. Emma  You are ALLOWED to disagree <laughs> /
89. Cath  We know what we’re talking about don’t we? /
90. Lisa  Oh the clues in the poem = /

Plate 4. You are ALLOWED to disagree.
They used hedges such as ‘maybe’ and softeners, ‘I don’t think so’ and a question formed through rising intonation ‘Sixteenth?’ which all expressed uncertainty and conjecture rather than confrontation. Finally Emma commented ‘You are ALLOWED to disagree’ highlighting the factual quandary, but emphasising that this was not critical to their understanding of the poem or their ability to collaborate. Cath finally closed this section with ‘We know what we’re talking about, don’t we?’ the irony of this remark was not acknowledged by the girls, for indeed although they clearly did not agree about what century was depicted, they shared a view about the conventions of the period. Thus, where there was a dispute, the girls were keen to overlook it and negate its importance, for solidarity, and the ability to move on together seemed paramount. Reinforcing their shared characterisation of the period the girls reaffirmed these understandings in staves 91–102. This exchange of affirmations, repetition of ‘Yeah’, and the echoing syntax as well as the linked lexicon about knights, ladies and lords all contributed to the justice of Cath’s assumption: ‘We know what we’re talking about, don’t we?’ The fast pace of this stretch, with each individual’s utterance latching on to the next, they collaboratively depicted the scene of an era they could all envisage but were incapable of labelling. In this way the girls overcame any dispute and prioritised understanding of the text over historical fact, building up the final agreement through a process of accretion.

Humour was commonly used as a vehicle for cementing good relations and it was particularly useful when pupils wished to avoid conflict resulting in confrontation. In discussing a question which asked about what clues Tennyson gives the reader about The Lady of Shallott as a person, Emma wished to point out that although not much was known about her, she did have a hobby which showed something about her character (Plate 5).
In a further example of double voicing (Bakhtin, 1981), Emma’s intertextual use of psychological vocabulary appropriated from popular interpretations of obsessive disorders, worked to focus the group’s attention on the character’s constant pastime, ‘weaving’. In doing so she contradicted Julie’s statement but achieved this by being slightly derogatory about The Lady of Shalott, rather than about Julie’s claim. Emma’s use of a ‘psychological voice’ within her own discourse meant that she could distance herself whilst also disagreeing with Julie. This timely use of humour softened the contradiction but moved quickly to evidence further strange behaviour ‘looking in mirrors’. Moreover, syntactically Emma’s remark continued from Julie’s via the conjunction ‘apart from’, which conceded to the truth of Julie’s main clause and then went on to qualify it, rather than contradict. In this way, Emma contradicted Julie without threatening ‘her face’ (Goffman, 1967, p. 8).

This technique of disagreeing using humour which acknowledged the value of a remark whilst nevertheless disputing it, was a common way of expressing contestation in groups which were more successful in maintaining good relations, keeping on task and achieving a high level of supportive learning. As Sheldon (1997) has asserted, this technique which again exemplifies double voicing, was certainly more common among girls’ groups.

In these examples the skills which pupils utilised to disagree with each other whilst maintaining their friendship have been demonstrated, showing also how good relations are often cemented further.
4. Concluding remarks

In this paper I have sought to show how these girls’ discussions contributed to their academic success. Whilst I would not argue that all girls habitually work in the ways illustrated here, my observations concur with those of other analysts in the field (Coates, 1996; Goodwin, 1998; Sheldon, 1997). In working together, the girls I studied constructed polyphonic texts and worked in a way which supported collaborative learning (Vygotsky, 1986).

The girls’ discussions tended to prioritise rapport and a sense of group solidarity. The harmonious nature of the discussions derived from the way in which pupils worked together on one theme, exploring its possibilities, sometimes introducing related ideas from their own lives. The strong sense of companionship was shown through the girls’ confidence to experiment with words and ideas, the lexical and grammatical cohesion (echoing, chorusing, repetition) the frequent use of affirmative minimal responses and the space for speakers to take long turns on occasion. The ability to share personal information and to combine friendship work with the task was most notable. The determination to consolidate amity meant that differences of opinion were often marginalised. However, pupils managed disagreements by maintaining the cohesion of their discourse and without breaking the spell of friendship.

The evidence that the girls enjoyed their discussions was convincing, not simply because of the fact that they all mentioned this during their work, but also through their concentrated and enthusiastic approach. Their discussions showed that learning is facilitated in an environment where participants share a sense of purpose and where social goals could be achieved simultaneously through the academic agenda.

Other work looking at the role of friendship in collaborative learning similarly found that friends’ interactions tend to reflect ‘high affiliation’ and that ‘Relationships often improve when peers work together on collaborative tasks’, this more often being the case with girls (Strough, Swenson, & Cheng, 2001, p. 478). Thus, even where girls were not initially close friends, in this study, their interaction styles actually promoted friendship as well as learning.

It is of course not always the case that girls collaborate with ease. Hey’s ethnographic work (1997) about girls’ friendships reveals how girls can ostracise each other and also turn against school values. However, a theme which stoically remains throughout her intricate study is the potency of girls’ relationships and how together they are ‘complicit with the overwhelming logics of hegemonic gender narrative’ (Hey, 1997, p. 129).

‘The phenomenon of boys underachievement’ seems to have dominated educational debate in the nineties (Younger, Warrington, & Williams, 1999, p. 327) and seems set to continue with urges and polemic from a government intently focusing on statistics concerning measurable achievement (DfES, 2001, 2002). In current determinations to raise boys’ achievement there remains a danger that girls will be allowed less space to make use of classroom time for focused discussions. In foregrounding aspects of girls’ collaborative discursive practices, I hope that despite pressures to cover curriculum ground, opportunities will continue to be provided for them to develop co-operative learning allegiances.
## Appendix A. Transcription layout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. End of a tone group</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>tears everywhere/yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Questioning utterance</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>How do you know?/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Incomplete word or utterance</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>he built a - /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Momentary pause</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>a tear/ that’s seven/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. A longer pause</td>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>like (.) the monster (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Immediate latching of successive talk</td>
<td>=</td>
<td>Kim: OK. er = Omar: Like on a rainy day?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Uncertain transcription</td>
<td>(word)</td>
<td>had (strolled) DOWN/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Indecipherable utterance</td>
<td>(XX)</td>
<td>had (XX) DOWN/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Paralinguistic information</td>
<td>&lt; &gt;</td>
<td>&lt;laughs&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Text referred to by paralinguistic information</td>
<td>Underline</td>
<td>Yeah it is isn’t it?/&lt;laughs&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Emphatic utterance</td>
<td>CAPS</td>
<td>not TOO bad./</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Spoken louder than other utterances</td>
<td>Bold</td>
<td>but WHY would he?/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Overlapping utterance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omar: What about him chasing after them?</td>
<td></td>
<td>with the gun/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim:</td>
<td></td>
<td>with the shot gun/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The transcription layout is based upon that devised by Coates (1996).

## References


