‘Group work and feedback’ transcript

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NARRATOR: Looking in detail at classroom teaching is important for understanding what precisely makes a lesson work well. This programme does exactly that – offering an important insight into the craft of classroom teaching.

Malcolm Reed and Sasha Matthewman are experts on classroom practise. Working at Bristol University’s School of Education, they both have many years’ experience of training new teachers. We’ve asked them to carefully observe a video of a lesson and to comment on specific aspects of what they see.

The lesson they’re going to be watching is with a year-7 geography class at Backwell School, in Bristol. You can watch the lesson in its entirety on the Teachers TV website, in a programme called ‘Uncut Classrooms – Geography’. Malcolm and Sasha are going to pause and replay the video, to help highlight certain key moments. They’re going to be focusing on group work and pupil feedback within the lesson.

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: I’ve come up with six points that I think maybe you can’t get.

NARRATOR: Teacher Claire McKenzie is exploring the arguments for and against hedgerow removal from British farmland. We join the 40-minute lesson about 10 minutes in, as she’s about to begin a piece of group work exploring the conservationists’ arguments.

MALCOLM REED: Let’s see how she works.

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: The next part of lesson, we’ve done being a farmer. We’ve got to take the other end of the stick now. We’ve got to put on our conservationist hat and be the conservationist. Why do the conservationists want to keep the hedgerow [INAUDIBLE]?

So what you’re going to do now is, on your name tags you’ve got a number. And you’re going to go to the numbered station. When you get there, you are going to have to compete a little task. And it says on the task sheet what you have to do when you get there.

Now, I’m only going to give you about five minutes –

MALCOLM REED: There’s some nice stuff here. I think that what’s emerging, in turns of the learning style that she wants to develop in this lesson, is, to some degree, a form of inquiry learning – a group going to look at a set of resources, to make some decisions, to think it through, to ask questions of what’s happening, and to come up with some reasons. And this is neat, in the sense that what she’s doing is she’s moving them out of the settled positions that they’ve occupied.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: OK, let’s see how they get on.

STUDENT: I was a 3.

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: A 3? So you can go there, then, with those boys. All right, Mike? Do you know what you’re doing?

STUDENT: Yep.

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: Yeah? You’ve all got to fill out a sheet –

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: OK. It’s home groups, expert groups, isn’t it? The jigsaw technique – that she’s using. And using it very efficiently. I mean, I’m just thinking, what a lot of preparation for five minutes’ work that they’re going to be doing and thinking, well, if you are going to – as a teacher, if you are going to put in that much preparation of resources and everything else, you want to make more of it.

MALCOLM REED: Absolutely. It’s a really good technique for a kind of –

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: It’s great technique.

MALCOLM REED: – established piece of research or longer piece of –

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: Give it more weight.

MALCOLM REED: – discussion. But the other thing that I am a little bit concerned by this is the fact that she’s not really rehearsing with the pupils why they’re doing this. She’s kind of assuming that they’ll just get on with it.

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: – five, four, three, two – you all right, there, Nick? Yeah? Well done. Right. Fantastic. Right.

So each person –

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: OK.

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: – has only got part of this –

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: It’s remarkable how fast this class have got into groups, considering – [LAUGH] considering the way that it’s been set up, they’re incredibly well-behaved, and they have just gone on, and they are just doing it, really.

MALCOLM REED: And I could think of plenty of situations where that would have turned into disaster.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: Yeah, it would be a nightmare. So it has actually – yeah, she’s actually pulled it off, here, really. So let me just – shall we just move on to the home-group bit?

STUDENT: – they didn’t have the hedges, the Jack Russells could catch them? But if they have the hedges, they can hide?

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: Right, so – yeah, so it’s an – perhaps important defence –

STUDENT: Yeah, defence.

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: – important for defence.

MALCOLM REED: Did see where she went ‘important for defence’, just then, and she nodded down towards the girl who’s holding the pen? And what that’s telling me is that there’s one person – you can see the girl has got, in her hand – you can see that she’s got the pen. So she’s the scribe, I think, for this group and this task. She’s the one who’s doing the writing.

And you could see that there was a – there’s a way in which what she’s doing is that she’s listening to people and what they’re saying, and then she gave a little nod down, which indicated, this is something that I think you should be writing down.

Now she never, ever says this explicitly. There’s nothing about writing this down. But you can see, through the visual interaction – the face contact – that there is an issue that she wants, here.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: Well, if they pick up on that, then that’s enough, isn’t it?

MALCOLM REED: Yeah, if they do, yeah.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: I mean, I really like the way that she actually does sit down with a group and talk with them and listen to them. Quite often, we see teachers just in supervisory role, who are just patrolling –

MALCOLM REED: Circulating, yeah.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: – rather than actually getting down, talking to the children, and actually finding out what they think, and prompting them, and moving them forward. And she does that very well, I think, throughout.

MALCOLM REED: Well, her style is inclusive, isn’t it?

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: Yeah.

MALCOLM REED: I mean, that’s the way in which she’s operated with each of the groups that we’ve seen – has been to draw different people in, even when, you know, there’s a point where – in that last one that we looked, you know, the girl is very forward and explains. But then she draws the boy in. And that’s good, because group work is often set up that one person does all the work and two people watch them.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: She’s good at pulling all the people –

MALCOLM REED: Exactly.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: – all the peoples in.

MALCOLM REED: What’s interesting about feedback is who actually feeds from feedback. Is it just the teacher, or is it the learners?

NARRATOR: As feedback on the first group activity, Claire asks each group to present their arguments for hedgerow removal on their white boards.

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: All right fantastic. Brilliant. OK, Catherine, can you explain one of your points, then?

MALCOLM REED: What intrigued me, at the beginning, was that she said, OK, put up your white boards so everybody can see it. And, of course, that’s exactly what didn’t happen. The whiteboards are being shown to the teacher, not to everybody else. So that kind of connection is –

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: At least it allows her to ask particular pupils to respond, rather than waiting for the hands up. So she does actually pick out particular pupils from what you can see on the whiteboards. So that’s fairly useful.

I wonder whether we need to move forward a bit in the lesson.

STUDENT: The hedgerows have – can have –

NARRATOR: The pupils are now working in groups again, developing the arguments they produced for hedgerow removal. The question for our experts is, do the pupils understand the new activity? And how do they feed this understanding back to the teacher?

STUDENT: Can you put stuff like, if you were going to change the crop – if – um – no – can you put –

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: Well, it isn’t clear exactly what she wants down on paper.

MALCOLM REED: No.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: She hasn’t modelled that.

MALCOLM REED: Which is kind of what that girl might have been contesting.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: Yeah. Exactly.

STUDENT: If you move your hedge, you can put, like, you’re willing to plant some trees, somewhere else.

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: Could do!

STUDENT: Or can we not put that?

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: I wouldn’t worry now, but that’s a really good point to hang onto for next lesson, because we’re going to start writing some persuasive letters.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: This is a classic example of the teacher just holding the pupils back, because she has her lesson structure in mind – the sequence, in mind. But actually this is an amazing moment where a pupil is really beginning to develop argument.

STUDENT: He was saying all these reasons against doing it, but he hasn’t really got any strong points that say you should –

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: Right, OK, so –

STUDENT: – and I will help nature by doing it?

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: Ah, right – that’s a good point – yeah? I would focus, at the moment – because we’re going to come on to that next lesson –

STUDENT: OK.

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: Focus, at the moment, about why he just wants to take them out.

STUDENT: OK.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: So although knowledge is the point. It is deflected. You know – we’re doing that next lesson. Don’t think about that yet. Why? She needs to be more flexible, here, I think.

MALCOLM REED: Yeah. And I was really interested in the expression on the teacher’s face, because that’s what the pupil sees. That’s what the girl is seeing.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: Yeah, and it’s ‘no, no’.

MALCOLM REED: Yeah, absolutely.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: ‘Hold back.’

MALCOLM REED: It’s closing it down. ‘I’m on my schedule. I’m on my script. You know, I don’t want you to go there.’ But what was great about that girl was that she argued back.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: Yeah! She kept going!

MALCOLM REED: She did it very politely, but she kept going after that. And she’s remembered what was initially represented as the objective of the lesson, which is to have two different views. And that’s what’s going on in her head.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: Now I wonder if we could just fast-forward a bit further on.

MALCOLM REED: We’ve had one set of feedback after the starter. And I think that we’re due another set of feedback.

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: I’ve come up with six points that I think maybe you can’t get.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: It’s the point where you organise the knowledge that the class has been working on. So how is she then beginning to categorise the reasons that they come up with? You know, there might be economic reasons. There might be political reasons. You know, there must be ways that she could organise them.

MALCOLM REED: Yeah.

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: I’ve come up with six points that I think maybe you can’t get. So I want you to challenge me, to see whether you can work out my six. Do you think you can beat me? Do you think you can beat me, the teacher? Because I’m clever.

Dan, you reckon you’re cleverer than me? Do you? Right – start off, then.

MALCOLM REED: I like the idea of a competition.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: Yeah, I like it, too.

MALCOLM REED: I like the idea that there’s something up on the board that they can reveal. But is the whole point of feedback simply going to be, compete with teacher? Or is it going to be about banking and really fixing the knowledge –

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: OK, so let’s see what –

MALCOLM REED: Let’s see how she works.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: – what happens.

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: I’m a bit nervous, now. Alistair.

ALISTAIR: Um – pesticides in the hedgerows can pollute rivers?

CLAIRE MCKENZIE: I’m going to feel very sheepish now, because I didn’t even get that one. I think you should give me an orange slip. Very, very, very upset that you’ve managed to beat me on that one. Liam.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: This was a point, here, where she could record that on the white board and say, right, OK, that’s important. That’s a really good point. Let’s put that up. But she doesn’t do that. So, again, it’s going to get lost.

And, in any case, are any of them actually writing down these points that are going up? The lozenges – the six reasons – are they being written down, anyway? I don’t think they are being recorded, are they?

MALCOLM REED: Absolutely. And that’s absolutely right. In terms of feedback, it’s all one way. It’s individuals feeding back to the teacher up here.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: So it’s not going back to them.

MALCOLM REED: Yeah, there’s no sense of her organising this knowledge exchange back to individual groups or to pieces of paper which record that knowledge. In terms of new teachers and people developing their practise, it is something that we see a great deal of. The feedback often elicits the comment from me ‘So what?’

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: Mhm.

MALCOLM REED: So you did this feedback, as a kind of mechanical ‘this is what I need to do at the end of an activity.’ But what did it do? How did it work as feedback? And I think that it’s an unusually thoughtful teacher who has thought through that process of feedback, to the point of knowledge exchange and properly –

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: The problem with this is that –

MALCOLM REED: – banking what’s happening.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: – she has thought it through, hasn’t she? But almost too much. It’s pre-prepared. It’s one I did earlier. And what teachers need to do in feedback is to be able to respond to what happens.

So what shall we say about that lesson, overall?

MALCOLM REED: Well, there’s some good summary points that come out of it. And it’s a really interesting lesson, isn’t it? And, in many respects, we need to hold onto the fact that she’s done very well. We did also like the way in which she managed groups, in the sense of listening to people.

SASHA MATTHEWMAN: And being able to be flexible and to respond to what people say. Which we saw at points. But I think that’s, again, something to work on.

MALCOLM REED: This is quite common in teachers that we see in classrooms, where they’ve reached quite a successful level of practise, but they need to be thinking more about the more complex pedagogic practises, really – the difficult bits of drawing things together and saying less and facilitating more, in terms of pupils learning. Maybe a real development pathway to consider.

NARRATOR: We offered teacher Claire McKenzie the opportunity to feed back on what Malcolm and Sasha had to say about her lesson. To read what she had to say, visit the web page for this programme on our website and click on the Associated Resources.