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When I think about the classroom conversation, a few pictures come to my mind which are the result of my experience in the classroom. In the first picture a teacher is speaking and children are listening to him quietly. In the second picture some of the children are listening to the teacher carefully while others are talking to one another rather than listening to the teacher. Then there is the third picture. In this picture, there is no teacher in the classroom and students are gossiping with each other. Now, these are the only pictures I can remember, because I never saw a teacher talking to a child as people normally talk to each other. These are my observations in government schools in rural areas. But this talk is equally important in any classroom whether it is in a rural or in an urban area.

As Krishna Kumar has observed (Krishna Kumar, 1996), the classroom conversation affects the learning process of a child in multiple ways but we hardly see the use of this rich resource in our classrooms. Conversation has always been one of the essential tools of teaching and the best teacher uses it with flair and precision. However, conversation is much more than an aid to teaching. Children need to talk and to experience spoken language, in order to think and to learn. Further, it is now believed that conversation is necessary not just for learning but also for building and expanding the brain as a physical organism (Robin Alexander, 2008).

In our view, the role of conversation does not end here. Rather, it can be extended further and made a tool for creating a democratic classroom. As we know, democracy is relevant to many spheres and to many spaces in our daily life. Similarly, it can take many forms (Robert Dahl, 1991). Classroom is one such space and in it democracy needs to exist in a form that a classroom evolves for itself. Classroom conversation can play an important role in this process. Below, we will explore the potential of conversation in this context. We will do this with the help of a few examples from the classroom.

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### Classroom Conversation: Example 1

It is a language class in the 5th grade. The class is in continuation with the previous few classes in grammar practice sessions. Students are given photocopied pages of the exercises from the book. They are asked to do these exercises at home and they are discussed in the class next day. In this session the exercise involves changing the tense of the statement into “present perfect”, “past perfect” or “future perfect”.

Some of the dialogue between the teacher and the students is reproduced below.

#### *Dialogue between Sumit and the Teacher*

Sumit has forgotten to bring his homework notebook. So he is asked to answer the very first question as a testimonial that he has done his homework and only forgotten to bring it to the class.

Sumit is standing, looking.

*Teacher: Sumit, where is your copy?*

*Sumit: I didn't brought my copy.*

*Teacher: Brought?*

Other children shout “bring”.

The teacher changes her tone to anger. She reprimands Sumit and doubts whether he has really done his homework. She asks him to do the first sentence. Other children are shouting the answers but the teacher says, “No one would answer. Sumit would give the answer,” and “I am talking to Sumit.”

Sumit is standing, looking at the sentence in the photocopied sheet.

*Teacher: This you have to do...Add a word before “the”...C'mon, Sumit!*

All these statements were spoken within a minute since the entire focus was on one student and the rest of the class was getting restless.

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Sumit gives a wrong answer. After that the question is open to the class (which is clear to everyone without having been instructed by the teacher). The teacher gives a bad look to Sumit. She asks him again whether he has done his homework. She then shifts her focus to the rest of the class as it is pretty impatient by then.

After the first half of the period, the teacher focuses her attention on children who are not raising their hands at all to answer. She asks them about the status of their homework. It turns out they haven't done the homework and as a result they are feeling lost in the class.

This leads to another dialogue between the students and teacher.

The dialogue starts with the student in the corner at the back row who is not participating in the conversation at all.

*Teacher: Pranav, where is your homework copy?*

Pranav doesn't have it.

*Teacher: Did you do your homework?*

*Pranav:.....(Mumbles.)*

*Teacher: What?*

*Pranav: Didn't do. (He doesn't say the entire sentence.)*

*Teacher: You didn't do. (Says the entire sentence.) Why? Did you try?*

*Pranav: I tried 1-2 in the notebook, but didn't understand.*

The teacher asks a question from the given exercise. Pranav answers correctly. The teacher's facial expressions say that see, you got that right!

*Teacher: Is the note signed?*

*Pranav: No.*

This conversation is a good example of how the teacher uses his/her authority. However, this kind of conversation is not of much help to anyone, including the teacher. What the teacher is doing here is little other than scolding the students (most of the time). But scolding is not going to solve the problem she is facing. In

other words, she is not trying to find any solution to the problem. In fact, she is not even addressing the problem. One way of doing that could have been to make an effort to enter into dialogue. But she is not making that effort. Nor is there any effort to create a sense of association among the participants in this class. So this talk is just creating and is going on in two different spaces rather than in a collective space in the classroom.

### **Classroom Conversation: Example 2**

It is class 6 in a private and co-education school. In the classroom girls and boys are sitting in pairs with their study buddies. It is a history class and the teacher is talking about the “Post-Mauryan” period.

#### *Classroom Interactions*

The teacher enters the class. Four or five students wish her good morning. Some say hi or hello, while others just look at her or keep talking to each other.

*Teacher: Good morning. What’s up? Earlier you have had English class na?*

*Children: Yes, maam.*

All of them close their English notebook and open the social science notebook. The teacher is standing near the board and writes “What is an empire?” on the board.

*Teacher: Last week we talked about “ what is an empire?” The Mauryan empire. Would anyone like to share about the Mauryan empire?*

Many children raise their hands.

*Suranjay: Maam, the empire of the Mauryas covered a large part of the subcontinent. The focus was on control by a single power. They were trying to propagate a new ideology which influenced many small kingdoms.*

*Vibhor: Maam, maam, just like the case of Dhamma of Ashoka. He also used a script of punch-marked coins, in exchange of transactions to bring a degree of uniformity.*

*Teacher: Yes, right Vibhor. Would anyone else like to add something?*

*Tanya: I think the empire’s emphasis was on control. They wanted to bring*

*uniformity in the subcontinent but they ignored the needs of ordinary people.*

*Teacher: Yes, exactly. Mauryan empire mein dhyan iss ke upar diya jata tha ki kis tareeke se uniformity laee jaye sub riyasaton mein, kis tareeke se ek hee rule bane, ek hee king rule kare. Tanya, you are right. Needs of ordinary people were totally ignored by the emperors.*

*Teacher: (The teacher starts writing on the board about the post-Mauryan period.) Today we are going to talk about what happened after the Mauryan period. Okay? Now, would anyone like to share about the post-Mauryan period?*

*Aditya: There was no sense of governance. What might have happened? Kya ho raha hoga poore empire mein? Pata nahin kisi ko chinta thee ya nahin.*

*Vipul: Yes. No one was bothered.*

Seven students raise their hands to share something.

*Samarth: Ministers must have come to discuss the situation of the empire. The king thought that it was difficult to control the empire and the empire broke up. I am worried ki uske baad kya hua tha.*

*Shreya: More kingdoms obviously. It was again divided into small kingdoms and again those kingdoms were clubbed into an empire.*

*Teacher: Yes, Shreya, you are right. The empire broke up into small territories or kingdoms and again an emperor came and on the basis of his ideologies he controlled those territories and clubbed them into an empire.*

*Teacher: Any idea? Kisi ko naam pata hai? What were those kingdoms about which we are talking?*

*Rishabh: Videha.*

*Teacher: Yes, Videha is one kingdom. Any other?*

*Sparsh: The trade system also fell down. People of the Mauryan period must have gone to hide themselves in their houses. People at that time had no rights. They were not free to share their views, they were slaves. I think, like the people in Taliban.*

*Tanya: Yes, Sparsh. Girls are not allowed to go to school and lots of violence can be seen in many countries because a group of people wants people to adopt their*

ideology.

*Teacher: Yes, you are right, Tanya. The condition of girls is really bad and this also shows that the control is in few hands and they are dominating the ordinary people. Sparsh, your concern is really very genuine. The downfall of the empires must have influenced the life of ordinary people.*

*Teacher: Aacha, mujhe aab batao, Mauryan time pe kaun ambassador aaya tha.*

*Vipul: Megasthanese ambassador, maam.*

*Samarth: Please, please main.*

*Teacher: Samarth, we should also give others chance to speak. OK, share what you want to share.*

*Samarth: Maam, they did not respect human rights at that time. It was the monarchy system that was followed in all the empires.*

*Teacher: Yes, Samarth, at that time the monarchy system was followed in the empires as all the provinces were ruled by one person. But the empire declined and after the decline the Indo-Greek tribes came. Kya bologe unhe jo tribes bahar se ayeen?*

*Rishabh: Invaders.*

*Samarth: Maam, one thing, just hold down.*

*Sparsh: Maam, dekho ye to galat baat hai na. There is so much of partiality between ordinary man and the king.*

*Teacher: How?*

*Sparsh: Maam, the king was concerned about his own security as during war the main objective was to put the king in the prison first. I think more security was given to the king at that time and there was not that much concern about ordinary persons.*

*Teacher: Yes, Sparsh, your concern is genuine. That happened because if the king was under arrest or was defeated, the whole kingdom would go into the opposite king's hands.*

*Samarth: But, you know, the army captured small-small areas. So, the kings had*

*more security near the capital.*

*Teacher: The present day capital is Patna, but what was the capital at that time?*

*Trisha: The capital was Patliputra, maam.*

*Shalok: But Anku maam, I want to ask: Samajh lo Delhi ek India hai. Security nahin hai. To koi bhee kabja kar sakta hai. Agar security cover nahin karege to hum to gaye, kyunki minister's ke paas to security hai, pahle ki tarah.*

*Teacher: Yes, Shalok, the same way during that time more security was provided to Patliputra.*

*Sparsh: Kmaal kee baat to ye hai ki agar king marega to uska beta sambhalega.*

*Shalok: Haan, obviously vahi banega. Abhee tere parents' kee property kisko milegee, tujhe or teri bahan ko na?*

*Tanya: Maam, the king must have been lazy and over-confident. He must have thought that when the tribals come, they will capture them in Patliputri, Patliputra.*

Other students are trying to correct.

*Teacher: When the empires break down into smaller kingdoms, vo aapas mein ladai kerte hain. Apne aap mein itna involved hote hain ki vo doosron par dhyan nahin dete hain. They think about victory and pride while they ignore the needs of ordinary citizens. Some of the tribes we will discuss in detail and other we will touch upon.*

*Aditya: Maam, anarchy hue to it was total hui naa.*

*Teacher: Yes, you are right. OK, one of the tribes was Indo-Greeks. Who will share more?*

*Rishabh; Bhutan's tribes attacked India.*

*Sparsh: Bichara India pita tha har baar. It's like each time we make a house, government bulldozers break that house.*

*Teacher: India ka to concept hee nahin tha tab.*

*Vipul: One more tribe group is there, Hakas.*

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*Sparsh: India ko koee toy samajh rakha hai. Jab chaha toda, jab chaha joda. India ghar mein hee ladaee ker raha tha. Baaki to faida uthayenge hee.*

*Teacher: Yes, you are right. People take advantage when we fight inside our country. Shalok, can you reflect on the condition of empires of the post-Mauryan period?*

*Shalok: I think kings at that time were Buddhist as we are talking about the Ashoka period. If they were Buddhist, then why were they fighting?*

*Trisha: Maam, we talked about Buddhist Kushanas. They did not follow Buddhism religiously. I think Ashoka was a Buddhist. Then why did he follow the path of non-violence?*

*Teacher: We were talking about the time when Ashoka also believed in non-violence. After many years of battle, he had adopted Buddhism.*

*Nitin: Maam, koee Ashok ko chaku maar de to kya vo nahin marega?*

*Teacher: We are talking about something else. Could you please concentrate on the class discussion? I think we are deviating from the discussion, Nitin.*

In this class we have very good evidence of teacher-student interaction and the quality of the interaction is quite good. We can see by reading this conversation that the teacher is giving enough space to students to make their comments and present their views on the issues that are being discussed. Students are hypothesizing about certain situations and the teacher is providing space for that and also giving equal importance to their opinion. Although the teacher is supposed to be teaching, she is doing it in such a way that it looks like a discussion in which all of them are participating with equal interest.

She starts the class by asking the students if they would like to share with her and the other students whatever they know about the Mauryan empire, instead of pointing to a particular student and saying, "Hey, now you tell me..." And the responses the children give are the proof of how comfortable they are in expressing their views and opinions. This behavior is actually the result of a long process of classroom discussion, which in turn is the consequence of a belief in building a relationship with the students in which the child's space is ensured by the teacher.



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This element of freedom and the feeling of freedom it leads to is not something that a person can give to another, in this case the teacher to the students. Rather, it is learnt and imbibed over a period of time by living in an environment and culture where this kind of freedom is allowed to be exercised as a matter of course.

In the classroom we are talking about, there has been a long tradition of the teacher appreciating the children's observations and their answers and, at the same time, making an opening for everyone to participate in the discussion instead of focusing on one or two students only. For example, while the teacher is teaching about the post-Maurayan period, the students in their comments try to relate the past to the present day situation and this linkage gives them a good sense of history. They are trying to create meaning in their own way and the teacher has no problems with that.

Even in the use of language we can see how articulate these children are and this articulation is accepted and therefore validated by the teacher.

Further, the teacher uses two languages as the medium of dialogue and instruction, rather than one, namely English. She uses Hindi, which is the first language of most of the children in this class, and English, which is supposed to be the prescribed medium of instruction. She is flexible enough to use both the languages without being too particular about teaching only in the medium of instruction. Although most of the time she uses English, the way she inserts Hindi in between makes it quite clear that her objective is not merely the use of language but also the transaction of knowledge to the students.

Finally, in this class the students are even addressing the teacher by name (*Shalok: But Anku maam, I want to ask: Samajh lo Delhi ek India hai...*), expressing a degree of freedom in the classroom which ordinarily is never allowed to children here.

However, there is one incident which I wish to highlight. It relates to what Nitin said at one point: *Maam, koe Ashok ko chaku maar de to kya vo nahin marega?* (If someone stabbed Ashoka, won't he hit back?) Here the teacher diverts the issue by saying, "We are talking about something else. Could you please concentrate on the class discussion? I think we are deviating from the discussion, Nitin." Actually in that question Nitin is trying to explore the deeper meaning of non-violence, which seems to be a very genuine query. But the teacher refuses to pursue this line of inquiry. Perhaps she thinks that at that moment her priority

is to complete the course within the given period and she does not want to prolong the discussion.

But in my opinion by doing this she misses the opportunity of discussing a very important issue which could have made the classroom more meaningful for life. I think we should not avoid talking in the classroom what life really means to us. But it happens that we always try to exclude from classroom discussions our real-life issues. Because of this reason classroom becomes altogether a different world for the child, which has little connection with the world in which he/she spends the rest of her life.

In other ways, though, this teacher handles the class quite sensitively and shows that she is aware, to a large extent, how a democratic classroom should conduct itself.

### **Classroom Conversation: Example 3**

This example is from a village government school. This time we are observing the goings-on in class 2. The teacher starts by reading a story from a story-book in Hindi. (This conversation took place originally in Hindi.)

*Teacher: There was a jungle. Jungle or garden?*

*Dinesh: Garden...There is a mango garden.*

*Salmaan: This garden has jackfruit also.*

*Dinesh: It also has vegetables.*

*Teacher: Which is bigger—a garden or an orchard?*

*Salmaan: A garden is bigger than an orchard.*

*Teacher: What type of garden have you people seen?*

Everyone starts shouting, “Me...me,” that is, “I have seen it,” but the question was not that. Then one boy begins to speak.

*Gulshan: Sir, I have seen a garden.*

*Teacher: Okay, what is it? (Perhaps the teacher wanted to ask about the fruit which grew in that garden.)*

*Gulshan: It is vakeel saab's garden.*

*Teacher: Where is it?*

*Salman: (Coming in between) It is a field, not a garden.*

*Dinesh: There are mango trees from here to Bandra Bhan (a place close to this village).*

*Teacher: Okay, what is it that grows in this garden, fruit or vegetables?*

Some students start making a noise. The teacher tries to stop them as he wants to listen to what Gulshan has to say.

*Teacher: What was it that you saw in the vakeel saab's field?*

Gulshan remains quiet. The teacher repeats his question.

*Teacher: What is it that grows there?*

*Gulshan: Jackfruit.*

*Teacher: And what is it in that farm which is near Bhanra Bhan?*

*Dinesh: Guava, black berry and Seetaphal.*

*Teacher: Which we cook for sabji?*

The students start laughing.

*Dinesh: No.*

*Mohit and Salmaan: No, sir, we eat it.*

*Teacher: Okay, then how does it taste?*

*Dinesh: Sweet. It's like sugar.*

Then they tell the teacher that Naval, one of the boys from this class, sells Seetaphal in his shop.

*Teacher: (To Naval) OK. Do you sell?*

*Gulshan: And papaya also. And there is rose flower also in the garden.*

*Teacher: How many?*

*Gulshan: Lots.*

*Salmaan: Yes, sir, in vakeel saab's garden there is rose and marigold also.*

*Teacher: What does he do with marigold?*

*Gulshan: He sells them.*

*Teacher: To whom?*

*Salmaan: To those who make garlands.*

In this class, the conversation is very informal but is taking place in a set up which is supposed to be formal, the school classroom. These children are second standard students who are sharing information which is not there in the textbook and they are the source of this information: it is their first hand knowledge. Secondly, they are speaking in their mother tongue, the language with which they feel comfortable. All this gives them the sense that their experience is worthwhile: it is something they can discuss in the classroom.

Moreover, one can see that, unlike what happens in a purely formal set up, this conversation is creating a degree of familiarity between the students and the teacher. And this familiarity is giving the students the confidence to feel that they are really a part of this space called the classroom.

A thing which this kind of conversation produces is a definite relationship among the participants, including the teacher. The relationship is produced by a shared meaning of things and this shared meaning will become the basis for any future activity of this group.

The informality in the classroom loosens the hierarchical pattern of the classroom, creating more space for children in the interaction between them and the teacher. Thus this whole process is actually the beginning of a new culture in the classroom, a culture that promises to be more democratic than the one which is usually found in this space.

#### **Classroom Conversation: Example 4**

This example is of the 3<sup>rd</sup> standard, again from a government school. The teacher has asked the students to go outside the classroom and look at the things around and then come back and tell what they have observed. (The idea for this

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example is taken from Krishna Kumar's book *Bacche ki bhasha or Adhyapak:Ek Nirdeshika* [1997]). Eight or nine students go outside and then come back.

One student, Kallu, comes back after spending some time on the road which is behind the school.

*Teacher: So where did you go?*

*Kallu: Sir, I went to the road behind the school.*

*Teacher: So what did you see there?*

*Kallu: Sir, there was a cow...There was a boy on the bicycle...*

*Teacher: (Interrupting the student) Okay, you tell me about something that you saw carefully, that you liked.*

*Kallu: Sir, there was a man. He was wearing goggles and nice clothes.*

*Teacher: Okay, you liked him?*

*Kallu: Yes.*

*Teacher: Why did you like him?*

*Kallu: Because he was a rich man.*

*Teacher: He was a rich man?*

*Kallu: Yes, he looked very neat and clean.*

*Teacher: OK. He looked neat and clean because he was wearing good clothes. So those who wear dirty clothes look dirty. Isn't it?*

*Kallu: Bad!*

*Teacher: Bad. Isn't it? So what did you learn from this? If you wear dirty clothes and walk around, what will people say? Would they say, "look at these good boys?"*

*Students: No.*

*Teacher: And look at the private school students. They come in good dresses, with pants, shirt and tie, wearing good shoes, with combed hair. How do they look?*

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*Students: Very nice.*

*Teacher: And you people...People will see you and say, "Look at these government school students!" So what do you learn from this? How should we come to school?*

*Students: In good dresses.*

*Teacher: With a neat shirt, bath and all that.*

If we look at this conversation, the teacher's main concern here seems to be that children should come to school after having had a bath etc. and not what the student has observed outside the classroom. Instead of going into the details of what the student has seen, how he has seen it etc., thereby turning the conversation into an opportunity for learning, he is trying to use this exercise as an occasion for giving a lesson to students about hygiene. However, he has little idea how to do that either. He displays a great deal of insensitivity when he openly compares his own students with students from private schools in the matter of cleanliness and more or less compels them to admit that they are worse off in comparison.

It is clear that this teacher has little understanding of the importance of classroom conversation in teaching and learning, where it is the job of the teacher to help children think and communicate their thinking clearly. In such a situation, the teacher's questions and comments should be selected and expressed in such a way that they help the child to extend his thinking and find ways of expressing new ideas. Instead of doing that, the teacher here is, on the contrary, stifling the space of the child for describing and interpreting his experience.

We can also see that this conversation is almost totally one-sided; it is the teacher who is the dominant party in this talk. The child's role here is only to report what he has seen outside the classroom. After that, it is the teacher who takes over. First he ignores some of the things that the child has noticed. Then he gives a definite interpretive turn to one of the things the child has seen. Then he goes further and uses the information he has received to impose on children an uninformed lesson in hygiene. In the process, the classroom is turned into a non-democratic, unfree and hierarchical space.

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We may mention here that traditionally speaking the classroom is already to a large extent a non-democratic space. This space is placed in a larger hierarchical structure, that of the school and of the overall system of education and instruction. And the teacher remains the dominant personality in this space of the classroom, who, for the child, apart from his own authority as an adult, carries and represents the authority of this system and the structure. In such a situation, the classroom conversation can become, in the hands of a sensitive teacher, a means to undermine, to the extent possible, the inherited unfreedom of this space. However, what is done in the conversation reproduced above is just the reverse.

In this connection, it is relevant to note that since the seventeenth century the advocates of democracy have stressed its relation to freedom. From this perspective, democracy is instrumental in ushering an environment of freedom. Certain rights, liberties and opportunities are essential to the democratic process, and as long as that process exists, there is scope for freedom to flourish. As a result of this broader domain of freedom associated with that process, democracy tends to provide a more extensive domain of personal freedom than any other kind of regime can promise (Robert Dahl, 1991).

If we agree with this argument, then I think democracy is the best system to adopt in the classroom. By doing that, we can ensure in the classroom the kind of free environment that will ensure the optimum development of the capacities of the students. And classroom conversation can be one way of ushering in that free environment in the classroom. As such, the nature of the classroom conversation becomes extremely important.

In this context, we saw in examples 1 and 4 above the kinds of classroom conversation that do not give the students freedom to express their ideas, opinions and experience. These are hardly are the types of conversation that would introduce an environment of freedom in the classroom. On the other hand, conversations in example 2 and 3 represent the kinds of conversations which, from this point of view, can be held forth as much more desirable.

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**Note:** The classroom observations used in this paper were done by Anupriya Gupta, Usha Malhan, and Jitender kumar.