

Enquire within

The Philosophy Shop's Peter Worley explains why it's good to get pupils talking – and suggests some practical ways to do it...

I often think that the success of my university career was largely due to a genuine interest in subject I was studying - which was philosophy - and the resulting lively debates that would arise as we socialised after lectures, still enthused by the issues that had been covered. I sometimes joke, in fact, that I passed my degree in the pub.

The serious point here is that the best learning is often done in discussion. It is the 'defending', the 'misunderstanding', the 'restating', the 'challenging' and such like that really bring you to a full understanding of what you have just listened to in a lecture hall or classroom. As the French humanist Michel de Montaigne wrote in his 1575 essay 'On the Education of Children': *"Let the tutor not merely require a verbal account of what the boy has been taught but the meaning and the substance of it...Spewing up food exactly as you have swallowed it is evidence of a failure to digest and assimilate it; the stomach has not done its job if, during concoction, it fails to change the substance and the form of what is given."* It is exactly the same in primary school; and one of the best forums for information to be 'digested' is in a discussion.

What is Enquiry?

The dictionary definition of enquiry is "to seek information by questioning". My elaboration on this is: "a collaborative exploration of the world and our place in it by the use of reasoning and questions". In the classroom the central element to enquiry is discussion and discourse. This is not an alternative to standard teaching, but, I think, should be included and integrated into normal teaching so that it informs each lesson rather than radically changing it.

How can Enquiry help your teaching?

- Enquiry develops awareness of possible answers and alternative routes to answers.
- It allows the teacher and students to engage with the controversial and ambiguous.
- It encourages the teacher and students to explore, re-think and re-evaluate.
- It facilitates a collaborative relationship between the teacher and students.

Circle Time

Many schools have circle time in order to discuss personal issues and feelings, but I recommend using this structure for other aspects of the curriculum not usually associated with the format.



Speak Openly

HELPFUL HINTS FOR A SUCCESSFUL DISCUSSION...

- 🗣️ Try not to provide answers, instead allow exploration of the ideas
- 🗣️ Use open questions, or open up closed questions with a "Why?"
- 🗣️ Sit so that all the children can see each other when talking (a horse-shoe shape is best)
- 🗣️ Cultivate an atmosphere of respect but allow (and encourage) respectful disagreement
- 🗣️ Always insist on The Reason Rule: when somebody says something, they must be ready to explain why they think what they think
- 🗣️ Allow the children to respond to, and challenge, each other

Bees and Spiders

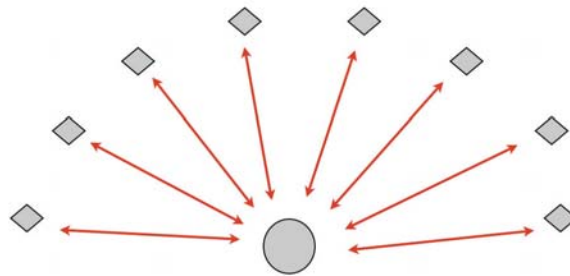
BE CAREFUL NOT TO STIFLE CHILDREN'S IDEAS...

In class discussions I have identified two main discourse dynamics, which I have called 'honeycomb' and 'web'. The former stifles discussion and the latter fuels it. Here's how:

HONEYCOMB

The honeycomb dynamic is one that is very much controlled by the teacher. Here the teacher responds individually to each contributor and approves each comment, before moving to the next contributor. The teacher acts as a barrier to the inter-development of ideas. Each speaker is effectively contained in a honeycomb and consequently the teacher ends up having to do a great deal of the work to keep things moving.

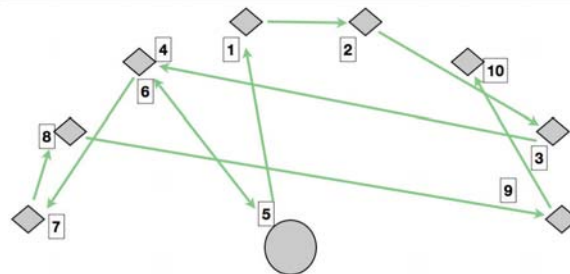
Honeycomb Discussion Dynamic



WEB

The web dynamic, however, connects the speakers spontaneously in terms of ideas and responses generating a collaborative dialogue with each new idea connecting or building on previous ideas. Like a flame in tinder this dynamic is self-fuelling leaving the teacher only with a facilitation role; the group itself does the work.

Web Discussion Dynamic



For example, as part of maths you could hold a discussion using the following questions:

- What is a number?
- Is zero a number?
- Are numbers invented or discovered?

Or as part of history:

- How do we know about people who wrote nothing down, such as Jesus, Socrates or Buddha?
- How do we know about something if we were not there to see it for ourselves?
- Is seeing believing?

These sorts of discussions confer all sorts of benefits. They allow the children (and teacher) to grapple with the general concepts involved in the topics they are learning about, and they permit the teacher to get an insight into what the children do and don't understand about a topic. Enquiries, therefore, become an excellent opportunity for informal assessment and evaluation. They also enable the students to explore some side topics and issues that would not normally find an airing in the national curriculum.

Strategies to develop other points of view

Children have a habit of thinking only as far as they can see (both literally and metaphorically) and also only as far as *they* can see – in other words they tend to approach things only from their own point of view. The appreciation of other points of view begins to develop in primary school – in some more quickly than others – but there are strategies that

the teacher can adopt to encourage widening students' worldview. Here are a few:

Sympathise and Criticise

This strategy is useful for encouraging children to develop the habit of looking at an issue from both sides, for and against. Begin by sympathising with the view and searching for as many supporting reasons as the class can find. Once this has been sufficiently explored or exhausted then adopt the opposite approach of criticising the view.

The Imaginary Disagreer

Once children have come up with an idea or a response to a question they often stop thinking. One way to encourage them to reason further is to ask what someone might think if they disagreed with them, and then (more challenging) ask them why they might disagree? Sometimes they even agree with their imaginary disagreeer and it causes them to change their mind. This is best done in

paired discussion when both children agree with each other.

Devil's Advocate

A playful technique for engaging the children with an issue is to represent an opposite – but perhaps unconsidered – view in one of two ways:

- Pretend the view is your view, to provoke a response e.g. "I am a member of the flat earth society and I believe the earth is flat."
- Role play: speak as someone who holds the opposite view, e.g. "I am an ancient Egyptian, and we believe that the earth is flat and resting on water."

It is a good idea not to do the first of these two methods too often because pupils will soon anticipate the strategy, which will ruin the impact.



The Philosophy Shop

IMPROVE THINKING SKILLS AT YOUR SCHOOL

Peter Worley (BA, MA) is a consultant philosopher and the founder of The Philosophy Shop - a social enterprise company teaching philosophy in primary and secondary schools. Its consultants are formally trained philosophers, and undergo further training with The Philosophy Shop to teach philosophy to children of all levels and abilities. Sessions can be aligned with the national curriculum or school projects and the company delivers Inset in questioning, thinking and discourse skills. For more information visit www.thephilosophyshop.co.uk or call 020 8699 9314.