



Mind Games

Better thinking should be a habit, not an aspiration, suggests The Philosophy Shop's Peter Worley...



We have all heard the received wisdom, 'think before you act'. Along their journey to enlightenment, Buddhists follow what is known as the Noble Eightfold Path, two elements of which are the development of right thinking and right action. An important aspect of this doctrine is the unity of the eightfold path – the idea that all the strands are interdependent. By cultivating right thinking, therefore, the Buddhist then brings about right action; and conversely, adopting the right practices encourages better thinking.

At the heart of bringing philosophy into the classroom is the view that encouraging children to

think better will directly impact on their actions. Contrary to the claims of some critics who question its usefulness for young learners, philosophy is of the utmost practical value – it is our thoughts and beliefs that are the well from which our actions, and therefore our characters, spring.

So how does a primary school teacher begin to encourage better thinking in the classroom? Here are a few practical hints:

Reasoning

From a 'thinking' point of view a teacher is more interested in reasoning than in answers. So, good use of logic that leads to an incorrect or inaccurate answer is to

be preferred to correct answers with poor reasoning, such as a lucky guess. Any classroom should make use of the Reason Rule: there should be a basic expectation that when a claim is made, a reason or reasons should be provided to support that claim. Once the Reason Rule has been assimilated into the classroom then you can develop a Relevant Reason Rule. Neither rule needs to be explicitly voiced – a teacher can implement both simply by asking the right kind of question.

■ The Motivating Reason

Reasons can be motivating in themselves, and this can empower children. A very shy child who rarely

speaks will sometimes put his hand up almost involuntarily when prompted by a good reason in his head, even if shyness makes it difficult for him to express it once he has been chosen. Careful and patient questioning can help him with the expression of the thought.

■ The Regulating Reason

Some children, particularly those who like to speak, will put a hand up when they have no reasons or perhaps even nothing to say, and will go on to attempt to think of something once they have been chosen. This can be an obstacle to the smooth flowing of a discussion, especially if it happens repeatedly. The insistence on a reason – and

later on, good or relevant reasons – can help to regulate a problem like this; and once the process has been grasped, the other children may well address it themselves.

Falsification

If you are assessing a general claim and you think it may be contentious, instead of directly challenging the statement yourself, you can set the class the task of finding an example where it is not true. For example, to test the claim 'everything changes', you can ask the class to find an example of something that doesn't change. Classes I have worked with have suggested 'the past', 'numbers', and 'events'. If they find just one thing that does not change then the claim 'everything changes' has been falsified.

Breaking the Circle

Children have a habit of engaging in circular thinking. For example, if you ask children what growth is, they will often reply with, 'it's when something grows.' Here is a game to help break the circular thinking habit:

Choose a word from the list below and ask the children to tell you what it means, but then say that there is a catch: they mustn't use the word itself in the answer. Write in the top left hand side of the board: "It is...", give the children some time to talk in pairs, and then ask them to share their answers with the class, mind-mapping as you go.

- Think
- Love
- Mind
- Grow
- Try
- Do
- Number

Once a class has been introduced to the game you can use the technique at any time when a child attempts to define a word or term.

Anchoring

Children, and especially young children, have 'grasshopper brains' and jump from one topic to other unrelated areas, usually in a series



of anecdotes. To encourage more disciplined or sustained discussion it is sometimes useful to anchor them back to the question under consideration by asking how what

they have said answers or helps with the original point. This provides a frame of reference for their ideas and enables the teacher to guide them back to the relevant

topic. Anchoring is useful for two reasons: getting the children to link their answers to the question encourages them to form arguments, and it can also politely eliminate irrelevant contributions.

Play Defence

A GREAT GAME FOR ENCOURAGING RETHINKING...

Each player has to come up with a statement they believe to be true. The suggestions are written up on the board and the group votes on one of them to be defended (try to encourage assertions of a less personal nature).

The defender (or defending team - this works either as an individual or group exercise) then has to defend his/her/its position with reasons, but the rest of the class members have to challenge them (an option to make this a little more difficult is to stipulate that the challengers may only use questions).

Example of play - from a year 5 class

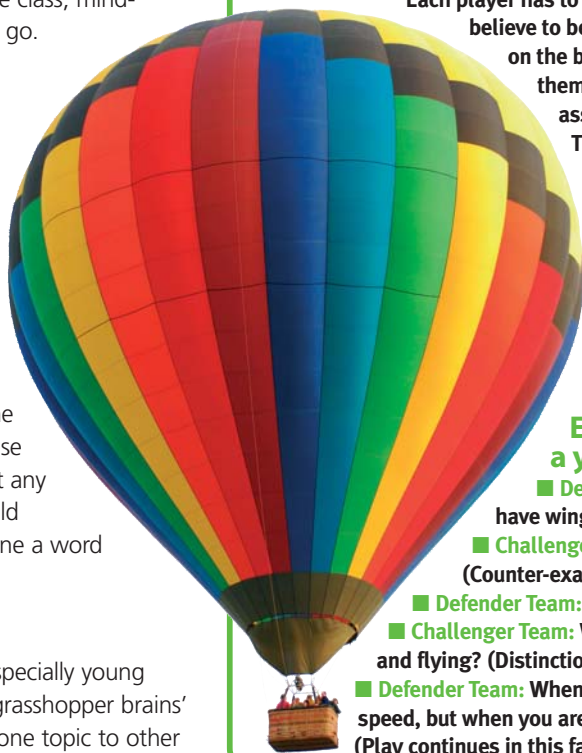
■ **Defender Statement:** "All things that fly have wings."

■ **Challenger Team:** What about balloons? (Counter-example)

■ **Defender Team:** Balloons don't fly they float.

■ **Challenger Team:** What's the difference between floating and flying? (Distinction)

■ **Defender Team:** When you're floating you can only go one speed, but when you are flying you can go as fast as you like. (Play continues in this fashion)



Re-thinking

Getting your kids to think is only the beginning of the successful teaching of thinking skills. The best indicator of good thinking in the classroom is when the children are able to re-think – that is, when they reconsider the position they have reached after thinking about it in the first place. As John White and Carrie Winstanley have argued, good thinking should not be considered as a skill-set, but as a disposition – it is an ongoing process, rather than an isolated act.

The Philosophy Shop is a social enterprise company teaching philosophy in primary and secondary schools. Our consultants are formally trained philosophers and undergo further training with us to teach philosophy to children of all levels and abilities. Our sessions can be aligned with the national curriculum or school projects and we deliver Inset in questioning, thinking and discourse skills. For more information, visit www.thephilosophyshop.co.uk or call 020 8699 9314.