

Robert Fisher Teaching thinking and creativity
Developing creative minds and creative futures

Talking to Think: Why Children Need Philosophical Discussion

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Thinking has to be learned in the way dancing has to be learned Nietzsche (1888)

Philosophy is good because it gets you to use parts of the brain you don't use in other lessons. Karl (aged 10)

'Why is speaking and listening important?' I asked a group of nine year olds. 'It helps to think,' said Andrea. 'It helps to build your brain', said Dan. 'You learn more,' said Pat. They were surely right. Human intelligence is primarily developed through speaking and listening. The quality of our lives depends on the quality of our thinking and on our ability to communicate and discuss what we think with others. Talk is intrinsic to literacy and to our ability to form relationships with others. It is the foundation of both IQ (verbal intelligence) and EQ (emotional intelligence). Every lesson therefore should include some time for 'talking to think'. This paper is about a special form of 'talking to think' based on an approach called 'Philosophy for Children' (P4C) (1) It is a form of dialogic teaching that emphasises the development of critical and creative thinking through questioning and dialogue between children and teachers and between children and children. Researchers have reported striking cognitive gains through this approach in the classroom (2). Philosophy for Children can help enhance communicative skills as well develop habits of intelligent behaviour.

These habits of intelligent behaviour include being:

Curious – through asking deep and interesting questions

Collaborative – through engaging in thoughtful discussion

Critical – through giving reasons and evidence

Creative – through generating and building on ideas

Caring – through developing awareness of self and care of others

Philosophical discussion develops the kinds of thinking, as Karl says, that children may not use in other lessons, including *philosophical intelligence* – the capacity to ask and seek answers to existential questions. Secondly, philosophical enquiry provides a means for children to develop *discussion skills* – the capacity to engage in thoughtful conversations with others. Thirdly, philosophical discussion of complex objects of intellectual enquiry such as stories enhances *critical thinking* and verbal reasoning - the capacity to draw inferences and deductions from all kinds of texts. Fourthly, philosophical enquiry helps develop *creative thinking* - the capacity to generate hypotheses and build on the ideas of others. Fifthly doing philosophy with children helps develop *emotional intelligence* – the capacity to be self-aware and caring towards others, providing essential practice in *active citizenship* and participative democracy. The chapter

concludes with a warning about the challenges that can arise from engaging in talk for thinking.

Being curious: asking open questions

Studies of interaction in the classroom over the last fifty years have consistently shown that it is teacher-talk that dominates the classroom and that in much of this talk there is a lack of open questioning (3) . Such studies show that often in teacher-led discussions that closed questions predominate, children only make brief responses, teacher-talk rarely challenged children's thinking and that pupil-pupil discussion (rather than gossip) was rare.

An open question is one that allows for a range of possible answers. A closed question allows for only a true or false answer. One of the problems that results from teachers using too many closed questions is that it leads over the years to a decline in curiosity of children. The need to test and 'cover' the curriculum leads to students to ask fewer questions the older they get (4).

Open questions, like those used by Socrates in ancient Greece, have many potential benefits. Like closed questions they can offer cognitive challenge, but they also:

encourage more flexible thinking,

allow depth of discussion,

test the limits of knowledge rather than one item of knowledge,

encourage better assessment of children's beliefs

offer the possibility to clear up misunderstandings

result in unanticipated and unexpected answers, new hypotheses and connections to previous knowledge.

A 10 year old child asked in a P4C session 'Is there a difference between knowing something and believing something?' replied 'Yes there is because, for example, I believe in Father Christmas, but I know he doesn't exist!'

Teaching for thinking requires a community approach to enquiry in the classroom, not one or two voices many voices creating single viewpoints but many voices creating multiple viewpoints. The community of enquiry is sustained by the use of complex open-ended questions and elaborate explanatory responses – by teachers as well as children. For example a teacher using a story that includes the theme of truth (such as Aesop's fable 'Mercury and the Axe') might prepare a number of open-ended prompt questions to encourage children to discuss the nature of truth. The following is a list of such questions that have been used in many primary classes (5):

Thinking about telling the truth

Key question: What is truth?

1 Do you think this is a true story? Why?

2 What do we mean when we say something is true?

3 What do we call something that is not true? What does 'false' mean?

4 What is a lie?

5 What do we call a story which is not true? What is fiction/a fable/a fairy tale?

6 Which character in the story was honest? What does 'honest' mean?

7 Which character in the story was a liar? What does 'liar' mean?

8 Is it better to tell the truth or lies? Why?

9 Have you ever told a lie? Can you say when or why?

10 Is it ever right to tell a lie? Is it ever wrong to tell the truth?

Here is an excerpt from one such classroom discussion, prompted by the teacher using questions like those above:

Child 1: Sometimes you say something you think is true. Its not a lie if you think it is true.

Child 2: I disagree with that because you could think something was true and say it was true when it was not true.

Teacher: Can you give an example?

Child 2: Well, if you could say it is raining because you thought it was raining and it was only birds on the roof. You can say something you think is true although in fact it is not true.

Child 3: You can only tell if something is true if you or somebody sees it with their own eyes and ears. That is why there are many people think things are true, like ghosts or witches, that sort of thing. But you might be wrong so you have to check it first before you say its true.

Child 4: Its not true because you say it is, but it might be

If Howard Gardner (1999) is right that the human mind contains many forms of intelligence then philosophical intelligence (what he calls 'existential intelligence') may be one of these. All humans have the capacity to ask and respond to existential questioning about ideas and conceptual problems – *Why? How do you know? What do you mean by ...?* These questions lie at the heart of talking for thinking. Such talk involves processing information at the literal level and trying to find deeper meaning at a conceptual level, for example by asking questions such as *What is love? What is truth? What is beauty?* But can children engage in this kind of questioning?

What research into P4C has shown is that even young children have the capacity to engage in philosophic questioning, like Tom aged 5 who asked: 'Where does time go when it stops?' Tom may not of course fully understand his question, but he is full of curiosity and wonder. This capacity to question lies at the heart of intelligent behaviour. But as he gets older it is likely that Tom will ask fewer questions in school. However the practice of P4C would help to sustain and develop his ability to question and interrogate the world. It has a well-researched pedagogy called 'community of enquiry' and teaching programmes through which the habits of intelligent behaviour can be developed. These habits will help them face the conceptual problems and conflicts that face them in an uncertain world. An eight year old expressed the problem we all face: 'The trouble is people are telling you different things, and sometimes your mind tells you to do different things too!'

Gardner (1999) argues that 'students should probe with sufficient depth a manageable set of examples so that they come to see how one thinks and acts in the manner of a scientist, a geometer, an artist, an historian.' In terms of philosophical intelligence this means showing

students what it is like to think and act as a critical speaker, listener and thinker. Michael Ross is a teacher who has used P4C with his primary school classes for many years. He does this he says:

'for the simple reason that philosophy in itself is one of the basic activities of human beings - the questions about life - Why are we here? What is it all about? What ought I to do? etc may be ignored due to the pressures of everyday life but they are all ultimately addressed by everyone at various periods throughout their lives.'

The following are some of the questions raised by a group of Year 3& 4 children (7/9 year olds) who had asked if they could discuss God at their next philosophy session in the community of enquiry (6). The questions reflect the breadth of their vision and imagination:

- Who made God?
- Who is God?
- How was God made? How old is God?
- How did God make the world?
- Why was God made?
- Is God real?
- How did He make us?
- What does Heaven look like?
- Why is God so special?
- Why does God make thunder?
- Why did God make us?
- Why did God make the devil?
- Why does God kill us?

Why did God make swear words?

The unique value of P4C is that it is the only well-researched thinking approach that focuses specifically on developing questioning, and in particular the kinds of questioning that enable them to think and act with philosophical intelligence.

Collaborating in thoughtful discussion

A community of enquiry seeks to create the optimal conditions for group discussion. One of the prime benefits of this is that it helps children to internalise the ground rules for intelligent discussion. Recent research shows how important this process is in children's thinking. One study describes how teaching the ground rules for effective discussion helped children do better at non-verbal reasoning test problems than control classes who had not been taught rules for discussion (7). Simply learning how to discuss in reasonable and reflective ways seems to help improve children's reasoning and problem solving skills.

What is important is to establish the ground rules for such discussion. One teacher did this by listing and discussing with the children all the 'talking' words they could think of, such as 'argument, 'discussion' and 'reason'. The children in groups then discussed and agreed the meaning of each word (with the help of dictionaries and thesauruses). Then they discussed in

groups 'the most important rules that people talking in groups should follow' and were asked to come up with no more than six of these. They then discussed as a class the different sets of rules and agreed a final list to display in the classroom, which was:

Our rules for talking and listening

We only talk one at a time

We all listen to the speaker

We respect what people say – no 'put downs'

We try to give reasons for what we say

We say what we mean

We can disagree and say 'Why?'

The aims of P4C focus not only on questioning, but on developing discussion and thinking skills. The discussion skills that underlie any learning conversation are also the skills which underpin the National Curriculum in England (DfEE/QCA 2000), namely information-processing, enquiry, reasoning, creative thinking and evaluation.

P4C provides opportunities for developing:

Information-processing skills : through seeking the meaning of concepts and ideas and using precise language to express what we think. 'Philosophy is good,' as Paul, aged 10 said, 'because it helps you understand what you mean.' Information is sought during discussion by use of questions such as: *What do we know from this? What do we not know? What do we need to know?*

Enquiry skills: through asking relevant questions, posing problems, and engaging in a process of serious and sustained investigation. Enquiry is facilitated during philosophical enquiry by questions such as: *What do we want to find out? What question(s) do we want to ask? What are the problems?*

Reasoning skills: through reading, discussion and writing to draw inferences and make deductions, give reasons for opinions. As Carl, aged 11 said: 'Philosophy helps me to give reasons and explain what I mean.' Reasoning is encouraged by questions such as: *What can we infer? Are there good reasons for believing it? Can we explain what it means?*

Creative thinking skills : through being playful with ideas, suggesting possible hypotheses, apply imagination to their thinking, and to look for alternative explanations and ideas. As Ravi, age 10 says: 'It can be fun playing with ideas, like thinking impossible things and wondering if they are impossible.' Creativity is encouraged by questions such as: *Can we build on that idea? Is there another possible viewpoint? How could it be different?*

Evaluation skills: through applying their own judgement to contestable issues, develop criteria for judging the value of ideas, evaluate the ideas and contributions of others, and practice being self critical and self correcting. As Paula aged 13 said: 'Philosophy gives you the confidence to speak and think for yourself'. Evaluation can be guided by questions such as: *What have we learned from this enquiry? How has our thinking changed? What do we still need to think about?*

P4C integrates all these aspects of thinking into one process. Nothing achieves these ends more effectively than open-ended group discussions of ideas and questions in which young people are interested, assisted by a philosophically aware teacher.

Being critical and creative

What philosophical enquiry offers is a tried and tested strategy for helping children to apply critical and creative reasoning to stories and other texts. The teaching strategy, which is based on whole class discussion, is called 'community of enquiry'. It is not a new strategy, but one that is gaining popularity, because it works in making children more reflective and critical readers. Teachers in more than 30 countries world-wide find that philosophy is adding value to the primary curriculum by providing a 'Fourth R' - Reasoning, to the basic curriculum. In Brazil alone more than 30,000 children are involved in a P4C programmes that are helping to raise standards of literacy.

How does it work in the classroom? Ideally the group sits in a circle or horse-shoe, the aim being that everyone can see everyone else. The following are typical stages in a lesson:

A P4C talking to think lesson format (8)

Focusing exercise – sharing the learning objectives, reminding the agreed rules, and using a relaxation exercise or thinking game to ensure alert yet relaxed attention

Sharing a stimulus – presenting a story, poem, picture or other stimulus for thinking

Thinking time – children think of what is strange interesting or unusual about the stimulus and share their thoughts with a partner

Questioning - children ask their own (or partner's) questions which are written on a board, these are discussed and one is chosen to start the enquiry

Discussion - children are asked to respond, building on each others' ideas, with the teacher probing for reasons, examples and alternative viewpoints

Plenary – review the discussion (e.g using a graphic map), invite last words from children to reflect on the discussion, making links to real situations and possible 'homework'

Children tend to expect to have their questions unequivocally answered by adults, not discussed by other children. They are often not used to having their attention focused on a particular issue for a length of time, to discuss questions in a systematic and sustained way or to consider things from a variety of viewpoints. But if they have a stimulus (for example a story) then even young children can respond to questions in ways that can be called philosophical. This may mean helping them to move from the concrete and literal aspects of the story to the conceptual and the abstract, moving the discussion from *what* happened in the story and *why* to thinking about *what it means* .

Discussion can be moved to philosophical levels through use of Socratic questions (Fisher 2001). Socratic questioning means using a series of questions to progressively engage higher

levels of thinking – including literal, analytical and conceptual levels of thinking. The following are examples of questions that engage these three levels of thinking:

1. Literal (or factual) questions ask for information

'What is this about?'

'Can you remember what happened?'

'What do you have to do?'

2. Analytic questions call for critical and creative thinking

'What question(s) do you have?'

'What reasons can you give?'

'What are the problems/possible solutions here?'

3. Conceptual questions call for abstract thinking

'What is the key concept (strategy or rule) here and what does it mean?'

'What criteria are we using to judge this (or test if it is true)?'

'How might we further investigate this concept (strategy or hypothesis)?'

This excerpt of discussion of the story *The Monkey and her Baby* (Fisher 1999) with 6/7 year olds shows the teacher trying to move the children's thinking on through a Socratic questioning:

Teacher: Why did the mother think that her baby was best?

Child: Because it was beautiful. She thought it was beautiful.

Child: She thought it was beautiful because she was the mother.

Teacher: What does it mean to be beautiful?

Child: It means someone thinks you are lovely.

Child: You are perfect ... Child: Good to look at.

Teacher: Can you be beautiful even if no-one thinks you are lovely?

Child: No. You can't be beautiful if no-one thinks you are beautiful.

Child: You can be beautiful inside, you can *feel* beautiful ...

Paul, a reluctant reader, aged 8, suddenly sees the point of it all during a philosophical discussion of a story: 'Oh I get it. We're not supposed to just read the story. We're supposed to think about it.' For him it is a revelation. Although still struggling with the mechanics of reading he finds he is able to make a personal response, to question, to discuss inferences and meanings using challenging texts during the shared reading session. For John, aged 10, philosophy not only gives him time to think in a serious, structured and sustained way, but also: 'It helps you ask questions. It shows you there can be many answers to one question (and) it makes you think that everything must have a reason.' For Michelle, aged 10, the community of enquiry gives you a chance to self-correct your thinking. She says: 'In philosophy lessons you can say what you really think and sometimes you change your mind.'

It is not only children who find 'the philosophy effect' stimulating and challenging. An increasing number of teachers build regular philosophy sessions into their literacy work, and

report encouraging results. The national organisation for the use philosophy with children (SAPERE) report evidence from OFSTED inspections which have praised the role of philosophical discussion in raising standards of literacy in infant and junior classes (www.sapere.net).

One teacher reports that philosophical discussion has added 'another dimension' to her teaching, one that will provide 'added value' to her Literacy Hour. 'The results for me were truly inspirational' says Morag Macinnes, 'and show that the approach is suitable for all children ... and shows also that stories and collaborative discussion develop thinking skills.' So what skills are being developed?

The National Literacy Strategy describes shared reading as the class reading together, 'discussing ideas and textual features, engaging in a high level of interaction'. There is no higher level of interaction with children than a philosophical discussion in a community of enquiry. The skills identified in the Literacy Strategy are those routinely developed in a philosophy for children session, including:

- linking the story with personal experience
- interrogating and evaluating the story
- identifying themes and ideas
- distinguishing between opinion and evidence in the text
- identifying implicit meanings
- developing a critical reading stance

Philosophy for children fulfils the criteria for high level discussion of texts, but it offers more. It is about training children not only to answer but to ask questions, to interrogate texts, so that they not only learn how to be active, critical readers, but critical and reason-able thinkers as well. Research shows that the practice of P4C enables children to obtain higher achievement scores in tests of verbal reasoning. But skills alone are not enough, what must be added to these to make them effective is the awareness of when and how we may use these skills to make a difference. Being reasonable means being more than rational. To be reasonable we need to be mindful of self and others.

Caring - being mindful of self and others

P4C does not overlook the emotional aspects of living and learning together. The community of enquiry creates the conditions that foster emotional engagement and self-expression. It creates conditions that engender awareness of and new feelings towards others. The child will better understand, refine and control their feelings if he can reason, explain and discuss in an optimal way. Discussion in a community of enquiry requires the group to develop trust and the ability to co-operate, and to respect the views of others. They develop insight into the

problematical nature of knowledge, and the need to subject what they read, see and hear to critical enquiry. Through this process they develop self esteem as thinkers and learners.

The two sets of dispositions or attitudes which philosophy for children aims to foster – being mindful of oneself and of others. Both derive from the dialogical nature of the process, developing individual skills through co-operative activity. P4C pioneer Matthew Lipman calls these aspects 'caring' thinking (Lipman 2003). Caring thinking involves learning to collaborate with others in a community of enquiry, developing empathy and respect for others. It means being guided by questions such as:

- *What do others think?*
- *Can I understand what they think?*
- *Can I learn from what they think?*

By taking part in a community of enquiry children develop personal qualities such as the need to listen to and respect others, and the self-confidence to speak their mind, challenge others and change their views.

P4C develops and strengthens what Goleman calls 'emotional intelligence'. Studies that show that a youngsters life chances are at least as much affected by emotional intelligence, as they are by other aspects of intelligence (Goleman 1997).

Emotional intelligence includes:

Self-awareness – knowing how/what you are feeling and how it impinges on your work, having a realistic awareness of ones abilities.

Self-regulation – handling emotions so they facilitate the task in hand, being conscientious.

Resilience – sustaining motivation, persevering in the face of set-backs, striving to improve.

Empathy – sensing what other people are feeling, and using that information in our dealings with them, being able to have a rapport with a wide range of people.

Social skills – reading social situations, using skills to persuade, lead and negotiate.

Philosophical discussion can develop all these personal qualities. It does so by making thinking relevant to children's personal needs and quest for answers. It is less a curriculum and more a way of life. It has more to do with what the Greeks called *phronesis* (practical wisdom) than it has to do with *tekne* (skills) more to do with the intellectual behaviour than competence. It is to do with the dispositions to behave intelligently when confronted with problems, uncertainties and puzzling questions. It is about persisting on a task, sustaining the enquiry, pursuing the question. It is about encouraging mindfulness and resisting impulsivity, thinking before acting, allowing others their say. It is about listening with understanding and empathy, devoting mental energy to attending to what others say, perceiving other points of view and sensing their emotions. It is about the metacognitive capacity to know oneself, to be aware of one's own thoughts and feelings and their effects on others.

John Stuart Mill argued we do not learn to read and write, to ride or swim merely by being told how to do it, we learn by doing it - similarly, only by involving children in democratic processes of discussion and decision-making will they ever learn how to practise it (Fisher 2003). In a

democratic society beliefs must be self-accepted rather than uncritically imbibed, freely chosen rather than externally imposed. The nurturing of the 'reasonable person' lies at the heart of education in citizenship.

The exercise of philosophical enquiry is, like any educative practice, most effective when it is participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them. P4C, with its emphasis on inclusive, democratic practice provides a powerful means for children to share experience and explore meaning. They can learn to express their views with confidence, to raise doubts and questions, and to challenge the thinking of others. Through engaging in a community of enquiry children learn how to:

- ask their own questions and raise issues for discussion
- explore and develop their own ideas, views and theories
- give reasons for what they think and believe
- explain and argue their point of view with others
- listen to and consider the views and ideas of others
- change their ideas in the light of good reasons and evidence

The oral nature of P4C is crucial to its radical democratic role. Children are soaked with written and visual information. They need to be given a voice, a voice to question, to challenge, to construct and deconstruct the meanings around them. As Jason, aged 10 says, 'Everyone is telling you things and not getting you to think things through.' P4C is a way to engage critically with their given world, and to find a space to think things through. Like other groups in society, such as women, ethnic minorities and the poor children's views have been marginalized and their claims to knowledge and to reason have been devalued. P4C opens up a space for thinking, for sharing beliefs and for creating knowledge, as in the following excerpt from a discussion by a group of 9 year olds on whether it is right for parents to smack their children

Child: I think Sophie's was a good idea why smacking children is wrong.

Teacher: What was the idea?

Child: Well she said it was wrong because smacking you doesn't tell you why it was wrong, it just tells you that if you do it you will get smacked. That means you'll do it again if you can get away with it and not be smacked. But if you are told why it is wrong ... whatever it is ... then you are less likely to do it again. Because you know why it is wrong. If you understand the reason ...'

P4C has shown to be an effective in teaching democratic community values (Raitz 1992). It gives children a voice and a vote in deciding the focus and the course of the enquiry. P4C offers an arena for the free flow of their views, a space for creativity and dialogue.

Final thoughts

P4C does not just provide a 'talking shop', or an exercise in free-flowing discussion. Research suggests that programmes that promote thinking skills have positive effects on academic

achievement (9). The research evidence from a wide range of small-scale studies across the world indicate that the philosophy for children programmes can make a difference to various aspects of a child's academic performance. Findings from my Philosophy in Primary Schools research project echo worldwide research into P4C programmes, show positive effects on:

pupils' achievements in academic tests

children's self esteem and self concept as thinkers and learners

the fluency and quality of children's questioning

the quality of their creative thinking and verbal reasoning

their ability to listen to others and engage effectively in class discussion

Research shows the positive effects of philosophical discussion extend across the curriculum (10). As Emma, aged 10 said: 'Philosophy can help in all your lessons, no matter what you're learning.'

Teachers generally feel that philosophical discussion adds a new dimension to their teaching and the way their pupils think. Children become more ready to ask questions, to challenge each other and to explain what they mean. As Kim, aged 9, put it; 'The important thing is not to agree or disagree but to say why.' Children too value what P4C has to offer, not only as a stimulus to learning in the classroom but as a life skill. As Camilla, aged 10, put it: '*Philosophy helps you make the most of your mind.*

A caveat

It can be challenging when children are encouraged to think for themselves. Uncomfortable consequences can arise from developing philosophical habits in children. This was illustrated for me at the end of a community of enquiry with Year 2 children (6 year olds). We had been discussing their chosen question after a Story for Thinking lesson when the discussion dried up. I then posed the class a question that I hoped might further stimulate their philosophical thinking. 'How do you know I am Mr. Fisher?' I asked. There was silence. This is good, I thought, for they are really thinking this through. The silence dragged on and I began to wonder whether any of the class would respond. Suddenly a child's hand went up. 'How do you know *you're* Mr. Fisher?' he asked.

When children develop the habits of intelligent behaviour the results can be unpredictable. When they learn how to interrogate ideas within texts and in the world they will also learn to interrogate you and what you say. Talking for thinking with children is an intellectual adventure that may be full of unexpected challenges.

Notes

(1) Philosophy for Children is a programme for teaching thinking developed by Matthew Lipman (Lipman 1981). It has since been adapted and developed for use in many countries (Fisher 2003).

- (2) For a recent survey of research see Trickey, S. & Topping K.J. (2004) 'Philosophy for children': a systematic review. *Research Papers in Education*, 19 (3), 365-80
- (3) For a useful summary of classroom research see Alexander R (2004) *Towards dialogic teaching*, Cambridge: Dialogos.
- (4) A trend noted in Dillon J.T (1988) *Questioning and teaching*, London: Routledge
- (5) For the story 'Mercury and the Axe', and further questions and suggestions on ways of using the story to create a community of enquiry see Fisher R. (1999) *First Stories for Thinking*, Nash Pollock, p45 and other books in the *Stories for Thinking* series.
- (6) I am indebted to Julie Winyard for this example. See also Winyard J. (2005) 'Cunning Little Vixens', *Teaching Thinking and Creativity*, Spring 2005, pp30-36 which has further examples of P4C dialogue with her class of Y3&4 pupils.
- (7) See Wegerif R. (2002) 'The importance of intelligent conversations', *Teaching Thinking*. Issue 9, p46-49. For more on his 'Thinking Together' approach see www.thinkingtogether.org.uk
- (8) For other descriptions of the stages of a P4C lesson see Haynes (2002) , Cleghorn (2002) and Robert Fisher's 'Stories for Thinking' series (below)
- (9) For reviews of research see McGuinness, C. (1999), and Fisher (2005).
- (10) In a recent study a three year thinking programme, including a P4C, resulted in a school getting its best ever English test results (Fisher 2005a). For more on the positive effects of P4C see also Dyfed (1994) and results from the Clackmannanshire project (Trickey & Topping 2004).

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