

HORIZONS

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN OUTDOOR LEARNING

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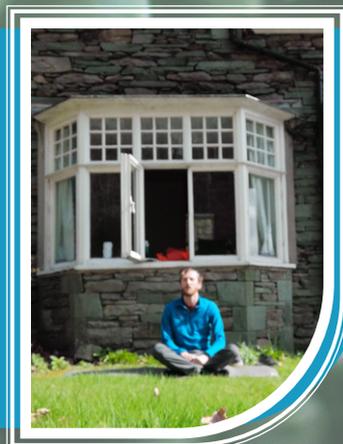
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For details about Forest School, go to: www.forestschoollassociation.org

Reflective tea drinking

Forest School, Philosophy for Children and the questionable nature of questions

When did you last think about the questions that you ask participants? Over many mugs of tea, we reflected on the similarities between our facilitation styles used in Philosophy for Children (P4C) and Forest School.

Mugs turned to pots of tea as we enquired and explored our preferred facilitation styles. We told stories of how we had applied these approaches. We reflected on when this had been less skilful than we had anticipated, and we even attempted to develop a model to summarise some of the questioning styles that we employ. This is very much a work in progress. You'll notice as you read this article that we like questions, so to encourage reflection by the reader you will spot questions popping up throughout, so your turn: "What has influenced your practice?"

Increasingly in Outdoor Learning, there has been an emphasis on the importance of reflection and evaluation. We may build in time for the participants to reflect, but does evaluation of our own roles as leaders, trainers, facilitators and teachers get pushed to one side? We often rely on the feedback from participants, maybe about how they felt, but do we ever reflect specifically on the quality of our

questioning? This need not be onerous, as proven by our conversation sitting over a brew. Hopefully this article will start that enquiry for you.

"How would you like to be seen? Are you someone who issues instructions/commands? Someone who is focused on what the participants create? Or someone who ensures that learners go away with new knowledge? Maybe you want to be seen as someone who is fun? What are the questions a good facilitator asks? Can the way we ask them alter the outcome?"

Our starting point was exploring links

between P4C and Forest School. We can see that there is an overlap, and that skills and knowledge and linked values and attitudes in each area are complementary in the delivery of outdoor sessions. Both P4C and Forest School have at their heart a participant-led approach. Forest School has six principles that help define the ethos. Forest School is a long-term process delivered by trained practitioners. Through a range of learner-centred approaches and practical challenges in a woodland environment they create a community of learning to support the holistic development of participants.



THE MIDGE: Buzzing around, relentless questions.

| PURPOSE | TOOL | BENEFITS | RISKS |
|--|--|---|--|
| Focusing in, drawing on the knowledge of the learner, not offering anything new. | Repeated short questions. For example: "Why is that?" | Establishes what the participant already knows, rather than assuming knowledge. | Disengagement. Relentless pursuit on a topic/concept which may not connect. |
| Probing for depth in answers. | "What have you observed?" | Can provoke greater depth in thinking. | Not bringing in new ideas, relying on the learner. |
| Supporting in testing/ exploring their ideas and observations. | "Why do you think that?" | | Can become a bit annoying! |
| Requesting reasons. | | | |

THE NETTLE: Questions that offer surprise and challenge; needs handling with care.

| PURPOSE | TOOL | BENEFITS | RISKS |
|--|---|---|--|
| To introduce a new point of view. | "I wonder if someone was to say..." | New ways of thinking can be introduced. | Participants seeing these introduced ideas as the 'right' answer. |
| To challenge thinking. | "Imagine if..." | Gives challenge to errors in reasoning. | Can take thinking in a different direction away from the interests of the learner. |
| To help steer out of stagnation or harm. | "What if..." "Is that always the case?" | Fosters creative and critical thinking. | Can be hard to frame a fact as a question, leading to perception that facilitator holds the answers! |
| Requires critical reflection and processing of knowledge/ information. | "I was thinking about..." "Someone said, I wonder if that's true..." | | |
| Encourages the participants to question themselves in some way. | | | |

THE CHRYSALIS: Transforming from the basic question to reveal the complexity in an idea.

| PURPOSE | TOOL | BENEFITS | RISKS |
|--|--|---|---|
| To shift the focus onto the big ideas/concepts that link with the learner's interests. | "What are your reasons for saying that?" "Does this prove that...?" | Creates a deeper level enquiry to include critical and creative thinking. This might take place over multiple sessions. | Facilitator can miss the point and misinterpret the interest of the group/individual. |
| Guiding the learner on to the next stage of their journey. | "Is this a bigger question?" | | Can be hard to find the concept in a question or statement. |
| Probing for depth in questions. | | | |

THE LICHEN: Symbiotic relationships. Learning with the learners as co-enquirers. Maintaining focus on the journey.

| PURPOSE | TOOL | BENEFITS | RISKS |
|--|--|---|--|
| Facilitator is not the 'fount of all knowledge' | "I wonder if..." "I don't know..." | Less emphasis on the facilitator and greater 'permission' for participants to share own thinking. | Greater ownership with learner means that the enquiry could have less focus and depth. |
| Use of 'open procedural questions' and putting facilitator agenda to one side. | "What does everyone else think?" "Can we...?" | Participants also learn to use open questioning style. | Misconceptions can persist. |
| More possible with a community that is used to working together. | "Has anyone got a question to help us move forward?" | | |

Figure 1: The Natural Questions model

P4C has at its heart a focus on developing a caring, collaborative, creative and critical community through philosophical enquiry and reflection. The approach has questioning at its heart with participants encouraged to generate their own philosophical questions for enquiry, questions such as; "What is real?" Responses are carefully facilitated and associated skills developed, such as the ability to listen to each other and explore different opinions.

Both P4C and Forest School are participant-centred and participant-led. The overlap we kept coming back to was in how the facilitator positions him or herself in what Alison King (1993) describes as; "Not the sage on the stage but a guide at the side" (1).

The facilitator becomes someone who is responsible for creating the conditions to enable what's known in P4C as a community of enquiry to develop. Our own enquiry brought us to the question, "What makes a good facilitator?" and finally, to our focus question for this article; "How do you use questioning effectively?". There are many examples of question openers that support facilitation in P4C. We focused in on the different purposes behind those questions, for example reasoning questions such as, "How do you know?" and information processing questions such as, "Can someone give me an example?"

We were drawn to an existing categorisation for facilitation used in P4C and linked to Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher (2).

- **Ignoramus:** pretending not to know to elicit answers.
- **Gadfly:** asking lots of little questions.
- **Stingray:** encourage a different response and look at something differently.
- **Midwife:** support and foster new ideas.

We also explored Karin Murriss and Joanna Haynes' (2000) work, again introduced on SAPERE level 2A training, where they described the facilitator as a:

- **Listener:** attentively listening to all voices and building trust.

“ I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think.

Socrates

- **Guardian:** not letting the discussion drift.
- **Guide:** exploring unexpected alleyways of thought.
- **Co-enquirer:** going on the enquiry journey with the learners (3).

We were particularly drawn to the model by Socrates, but of course wanted to develop something relevant to our own practice and the woodland setting of Forest School, so time for another cup of tea and on to our *Natural Questions Model* (see Figure one). By examining the risks and benefits of each approach we hope we can look for evidence in the participants' reactions to support effective facilitator response. We discussed at length how some of these styles were evident in our practice, how they might support the needs and interests of the learner, linking P4C and Forest School. It is worth noting that the examples we have explored are all open questioning techniques. "Does closed questioning have a place in enquiry-based learning?"

THE MIDGE

A learner asks,

"What is this?"

There is a lot to discover and identify in the natural world. Does the learner really want an answer or are they inviting us to engage with the world as they see it? Moving our response from giving answers to asking questions can really help synthesise information rather than hear it and forget it. An example of how to use this technique is to answer the question with a question:

"What can you see? What is it growing on? Are there more of them? Can you see any....?"

It can really help draw attention and sustain the enquiry, especially if the facilitator is looking for the edge of the knowledge. Learners who get to a specific answer too quickly are less likely to discover new information about the question. As we have identified it can be really annoying for the learner until they develop this enquiry habit. In experience this can develop into

co-enquiry (the Lichen) as the questions deepen beyond the knowledge of the facilitator.

THE NETTLE

The Nettle approach can shock participants into seeing something around them very differently, sending their thinking and enquiry in a different direction. Imagine two boys during tool work, staring at a worm and discussing its fate. Hovering over the worm is a hammer. *"If they go in half then you get two worms."*

The facilitator could tell those boys,

"Don't chop the worm in half!"

Or respond,

"I once read that they have up to five pairs of hearts. I wonder if they will keep on wriggling after they've been cut in half, but would they live for very long?"

The second response has provoked closer examination of the worm, looking for the hearts which helps us see the red line that carries the blood. Magnifying glasses encourage further exploration. Trying to intervene without judgement is tricky and the shock of a different perspective can help. We can also help learners see things differently with "Imagine if..." statements relevant to the activity they are doing. For example:

"Imagine if you were a woodlouse. Imagine if there were no trees."

Or ask "what if..." questions,

"What would it be like if you could fly like a bird? What if you could make a potion to give you superpowers?"

LEARN ABOUT BEES

Be inspired by beekeeping and the opportunities for education on page 11.

THE CHRYSALIS

Introducing boggarts and other mythical creatures can be a good hook, or starting point for sessions outdoors. A child could ask (and has),

"Are boggarts real?"

This is a good question! Rather than get into a debate about mythical creatures, the Chrysalis technique leads to a reframing of the question, and the development of a philosophical question; a question that is, "contestable, central, connecting and common" to our lives (4).

"How do we know if something is real?"

This reliably leads into really interesting enquiry.

"It's real if you can see it" was one suggestion. True, but can we see the wind?

THE LICHEN

Showing a group how to make willow into charcoal on an open fire, created an opportunity for a symbiotic learning relationship. The process included an explanation that all things that were once alive have carbon in them. The charring process burns away all the other





elements leaving the carbon behind.

The children asked if they could try carbonising other things, so we experimented with leaves and pinecones and flowers, enjoying seeing the carbon copies left behind. One child asked if he could put a rock in the tin to carbonise. Obviously, rocks aren't and weren't alive. Right?

Accepting the fact that the facilitator is not the fount of all knowledge means exploring ideas you think you know the answer to. We put a small rock in with the next round of things to carbonise, protecting the tin in case it exploded. Imagine the surprise when it came out a little charred (or covered in soot). The geologists among you will recognise that carboniferous limestone exists, and this sent us off on a new enquiry to see if we could find any fossils in the rock. A deeper enquiry for evidence that the rock was once alive.

In reality no-one sticks to one facilitation or questioning style. It shifts as an enquiry develops.

"Can you think of any examples from your own work?"

An example of a full P4C session in the outdoors might start with building homes so that monsters can move into the woods. There is a lovely story book

called *A monster's moved in* (5) which introduces the theme of monster and dens perfectly. The children are then given choices of different monsters to decide which one they would like to move in. Younger children through this activity are encouraged to give reasons and justification for their answers using the Midge approach. The Midge approach could also apply to the building of the shelters themselves of course, for example by asking, *"What is that?"*

The Chrysalis approach allows the group to hone the concept, encouraging participants to consider a bigger question linked to the activity, such as, *"What is a home?"*

To extend this they could consider the difference between a house and a den using the Lichen approach by sorting words in hoops and looking for crossovers in thinking as represented through a Venn diagram. This could of course lead to further philosophical questions from the students and further possibility for the Lichen approach with students co-enquiring. The Nettle approach can "shock" participants into seeing something around them very differently. In the example of den building, this is a great opportunity to bring in some Global Education. You could ask them to consider that some people in the world live in homes very similar to their shelters.

"What if this was your home? How would that feel? Imagine that you had to live in this shelter for a week."

When we reflect on how we use different techniques, it is important to consider agendas. Are you trying to pass on your own values, judgements and opinions or encouraging students to develop their own? Is the emphasis on the knowledge you are transmitting, or on cultivating the skills and attitude for learning? In your next interaction with a group of learners

see if you can consciously spot your own questioning technique. Perhaps there is a style that you typically revert to? Look for opportunities to be the Midge, the Nettle, the Chrysalis or the Lichen.

We all have our own facilitation style based on our values, our experience, our own training and our roles. There are as many styles as there are practitioners and each practitioner, in response to their audience will employ many different styles. Whatever ethos or approach we employ, is a good facilitator always learning and reflecting?

We welcome your reflections on our *Natural Questions Model* (Figure 1). We are dangerously close to running out of tea, but there is still more to think about ■

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IMAGES

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