PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY AS AN APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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"I've never thought of a question like this before"
James, Ulverston Victoria High School whilst attending the Biodiversity Conference at Ulverston June 2003

Chris Rowley has recently (2003) produced a book with Lizzy Lewis on the issues raised in this paper. ‘Thinking on the Edge’ is a book of thinking activities to develop citizenship and environmental awareness around Morecambe Bay. It has been written for teachers and those working with young people.

Introduction
When talking of rigorous approaches to education it is too easy to define rigour based on specific outcomes in terms of knowledge. Other approaches to enquiry are also rigorous, but here rigour is defined in terms of the ability to identify the real questions which underlie the issues and to develop thinking about those in reflective ways. We call this philosophical enquiry with children.

A philosophical enquiry with children begins with a stimulus, which will inspire questions. The stimulus can be a story, an image or an experience but whatever is chosen it needs to offer ideas which can lead to puzzling questions.

A typical Philosophy for Children session
The teacher is faced with having to manage a verbal enquiry in such a way as to maintain a spread of views, and to move the children towards rigour in their responses. This takes time and early discussions may be less philosophical than later ones.

After listening to, or looking at, the initial stimulus material children are asked to think together in groups of a question, which the stimulus raises. These should be questions that can be discussed, rather than questions for which there is a factual answer. The distinction is a tenuous one and sometimes questions which at first seem to be factual turn out to have deeper elements to them.
One of the most difficult aspects to this approach is knowing how to best support children in moving towards deeper questions without taking ownership of the question away from them.

In choosing the question, which is to become the focus for the session, we do not reject the other questions so much as place them to one side, some to be considered alongside the chosen question or to be re-visited at the end of the session.

**Philosophical questions**
These are questions which do not have obvious answers. They offer opportunities for us to explore ideas, placing teacher and student alongside each other in a search for deeper understanding. The questions in Figure 2 are essentially philosophical questions.

Identifying the question is the most difficult aspect of this approach to enquiry. In 'Thinking on the Edge' (Rowley and Lewis 2003), we have considered several stimulating possibilities varying from mysteries, environmental art, images and dilemmas. Overall, the use of story is probably the best approach. In the book we have also given a range of exercises to help develop specific thinking skills such as defining, distinguishing and sorting, all key skills required for any well structured and thoughtful dialogue on questions raised by environmental issues.

**Justifying the approach**
We are often influenced by the view that education is about developing tangible and easily measured outcomes. In the same way that 'National Standards' drive our numeracy and literacy objectives so, in environmental and citizenship education positive 'actions' which are seen to help the environment are seen as desirable outcomes. Figure 1 attempts to demonstrate the way that outcomes might be rather unpredictable whatever approach to learning we use. It suggests that actions in the environment are unpredictable and that education should perhaps focus on the process and associated standards that we can measure from that process.

Both standards and actions are of course important to education. However, a problem with both could be that they derive from a culture of certainty established by Descartes in the 18th century. Thus, can we be certain that instruction always leads to higher standards of literacy? In addition, in the same way how sure are we that a particular environmental action is the right one to promote?
Fig 1. Two contrasting lessons might develop from the same stimulus. An example might be that of beach litter

Objective and criteria for evaluation

**Lesson 1**
evaluated by demonstration of thinking skills used

**Lesson 2**
evaluated by absorption of knowledge about a particular set of consequences

Is rubbish the same as litter?
Where is the "away" when we throw something away?
Is rubbish what we put in bins and litter what we drop?
Is oil from a tanker or waste from Sellafield the same as litter?
If I’m using oil or electricity am I producing litter?

Litter can be seen, so therefore it’s an important environmental problem

We must clear all litter as a priority. It is always a negative thing.

How do we decide how to prioritise what to do about litter?

I will do nothing at the moment

I will do nothing until I understand this more

I will start to buy my electricity from renewable sources and try to reduce the amount of travel

I will spend two hours clearing litter

I don’t agree that it is always negative and anyway, it wasn’t me who dropped it

I will ask my parents where their electricity comes from

I will do nothing because I don’t like being told what to do
The process
In short, our instructional education, whether from the liberal environmentalist or from the not-so-liberal government department, is based upon a set of assumptions which need to be constantly challenged. Figure 1 highlights the difference between an exploratory mode to learning (on the left) and an explanatory mode (on the right). It may be that we need both in environmental and citizenship education, but currently there is probably a lack of adequate attention given to the exploratory mode on the left.

The National Curriculum offers the contexts within which we work, the outcomes, on the other hand, can be seen as the way in which we think about the material that we study. This is often a qualitative shift, but can still be part of our assessment of children's learning if we observe the development of thoughts and ideas rather than the assimilation of particular knowledge.

As with other specialist subjects, the greatest challenge facing teachers of geographical and environmental education in using a philosophical enquiry approach lies in the process by which questions are selected. We have to look at the balance between student/pupil ownership of the question and our own requirements to develop understanding of the conceptual areas embedded within the subject. This will never be easy. We still have a long way to go to develop approaches that both develop the concepts and ensure opportunities for the class to choose questions which they find interesting, stimulating and relevant to their lives.

Uses of Philosophical Thinking
Examples of conceptual areas where philosophical enquiry can help in geographical and environmental education include:

- Description and classification
- Diversity
- Pattern and boundaries
- Places, maps and communication
- Sacredness and beauty

Take the conceptual area of Description as an example, (Fig 2) There are philosophical issues in how we describe the environment. We can never have a total picture and therefore description is always from a particular perspective. Description is to give an account of what we perceive and to translate those perceptions into words. There is a difference between what we observe and how we respond to those observations. It is important to make the distinction between describing something and how we feel or think about it. This is a rich area for philosophical dialogue with children.

In terms of teaching, we need to find strategies which encourage children to ask these sorts of questions. Story is probably the best source, for example using Paul Geraghty's Wonderful Journey, in which a Grandmother describes a place that she had lived in as a girl. We have to use strategies that
focus the questions, perhaps stopping the story at a crucial point, or maybe going into the role as someone in the story. The combination of the philosophical approach and consideration of the environment is a useful way of discussing difficult issues in a context which is distanced from children’s pre-conceptions.

Fig 2 Philosophical Questions about Description

- Does description have to be accurate?
- Would it be correct to describe the Bay as dangerous?
- Can you describe something without using words?
- Is it the sound of the Bittern that makes it special?
- Are some things impossible to describe?
Bibliography
Cam, P. (1993) Thinking Stories 1 New South Wales Hale and Iremonger, (Australia)
Cam, P. (1994) Thinking Stories 2 New South Wales Hale and Iremonger, (Australia)
http://paulgeraghty.net/ accessed August 2011
(Australian Council for Education Research)

Websites
SAPERE http://www.sapere.org.uk/ accessed August 2011,
has an extensive resources list and links to other sites
SAPERE is the "Society to Advance Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education"

supports teachers, offering forums and resources to back up material in the book Thinking on the Edge available price £15 from:
Thinking on The Edge,
The Morecambe Bay Partnership,
32 Market Place, Kendal, Cumbria LA9 4TN
(Cheques or orders should be made out to the "Morecambe Bay Partnership")


Offers examples of children engaging in philosophical enquiry

http://childrenthinking.co.uk accessed August 2011

A downloadable (.pdf) report upon an 'Education Forum on Teaching Thinking Skills' 2000 including experiences from a primary school, and an extensive bibliography.

http://www.pre-online.co.uk/feature_pdfspdfspotlight79.pdf accessed August 2011

http://www.montclair.edu/pages/iapc/thinkingjournal.html accessed August

gives details of the journal: Thinking: The Journal Of Philosophy For Children, Upper Montclair, N.J:
Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1979-. Vol. 1-, 1979 - onwards held by the
Institute of Education, London
http://www.montclair.edu/pages/iapc/home.html gives some case
study research into ways of thinking

http://www.thinkingonlinecatalogue.co.uk accessed August 2011

A new journal 'Teaching thinking' was issued No. 1(Spring 2000) - by: Imaginative Minds Birmingham,
Subjects include citizenship, morals and social education as well as thinking skills. The magazine
appears defunct but the catalogue specialises in products that raise standards of teaching and learning
using critical and creative thinking including Geography and the environment

http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20060731065559/standards.dfes.gov.uk/thinkingskills
accessed August 2011

Archived DfES thinking skills site gives a comprehensive view of the whole subject.

Other Websites For Using ICT As Part Of The Thinking Process

Higgins S. (2001) in 'Thinking through Primary Teaching' gives full coverage to suitable sites including:


Inspiration and Kidinspiration software

http://www.dialogueworks.co.uk accessed August 2011

Newswise – a discussion forum for pupils to exchange ideas and opinions. No longer working – but still
publications available

http://www.geography.org.uk/eyprimary/primaryresearch/researcharticles/
Northumberland LEAs Thinking for Learning site accessed August 2011

Thinking Together site which supports collaborative thinking and reasoning. Extensive publications list

http://www.teachingthinking.net  accessed August 2011
Robert Fishers' site aimed specifically at primary children and their teachers.

http://www.creative-corner.co.uk/schools/tuckswood/home.html  accessed August 2011
Tuckswood Community First School, Norfolk. An impressive site with lots of ideas and good links