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A Teacher's Guide to Dialogic Pedagogy

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Learning *through* dialogue. Learning *for* dialogue.

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A Teacher's Guide to Dialogic Pedagogy Part 1: The What and the Why

This document contains the text of a short series of blog posts written in the Spring of 2020. It explores what dialogic pedagogy is, why it might be valuable and how a classroom teacher or school might get started with it. I do hope it is of some use - any feedback would be most welcome.

What is Dialogic Pedagogy?

Dialogic pedagogy involves teachers and students talking and **thinking** in a way that seeks out and values different perspectives, and uses them to develop understanding. The different perspectives in question might most commonly be those of the teacher (or the discipline) and the students, or those of different students. Such pedagogy might be characterised by the teacher encouraging / creating opportunities for talk that has the features of **dialogue**. It might also be characterised by a deliberate effort, on the part of both teacher and students, to get better at dialogue because they value it as a learning tool and because they see it as a 'good' in its own right.

Dialogue is a specific type of talk, distinct from others more commonly heard in classrooms. Participants in a dialogue are not trying to impose their views on others (as we often do in the course of teaching the curriculum) and are not willing to unthinkingly accept others' views (as students do for much of the time). Rather they are engaged in a collaborative endeavour to reach better understandings of ideas, and of each other. Engagement in dialogue in the classroom signals a suspension of 'putting in' in favour of shared enquiry,

reflection and **meaning making**. Participants engage in listening, questioning, answering, explaining, exemplifying, distinguishing, connecting, applying, evaluating and so on. They become sensitive to the differences in their understandings, and use these to stimulate further talk aimed at resolving such differences or gaining an expanded awareness of the different perspectives that are held. Dialogic pedagogy is valuable in all subjects, though its form needs to be adapted to context and to different 'ways of knowing'.

There is much more to say about dialogue, and I think that teachers interested in dialogic pedagogy would find it both interesting and useful to dig a little deeper. I have included some useful references in the bibliography below.

Why Invest Time in Dialogic Pedagogy?

Proponents of dialogic pedagogy may well have some shared beliefs relevant to education. In his 2020 book 'A Dialogic Teaching Companion', Professor Robin Alexander suggests that these include '**stances**' on human development, classroom relationships, procedures for managing interactions, reasoning, epistemology, ethics, culture and society, and ontology. My own commitment to dialogic pedagogy is certainly informed by a conscious stance on at least some of these things, which helps me to explain why I think the practice is so valuable. Of course, I need to remain open to the idea that my stances can change as I learn more, and so can my views on dialogic pedagogy, but for now, here's how I see things:

Firstly, a view about knowledge and its acquisition. One of a teacher's roles is to pass on knowledge. This might involve making new information available to students through talk, text or experience, and supporting them to store this information in long-term memory. To a degree, this can be achieved by various forms of transmission or self-discovery. However, new information is more likely to be retained if it becomes connected to information that has already been learned; this also ensures that the new information becomes **meaningful**. In her recent blog **Efrat Furst** argues for the primacy of meaning making, and helpfully defines it as 'describing a new concept in terms of other concepts that we already understand, in a way that allows us to use it'. Students need to be engaged in an active process of meaning making if they are to retain and 'understand' what they are being taught.

To help students to make appropriate connections, teachers need an awareness of prior learning. What relevant information and concepts are students likely to have in long-term memory, and how can teaching re-activate these and connect them to the new learning? Teachers are aware of the range of experiences (texts, experiments, problems etc.) students have been exposed to and the concepts they have been helped to form in school and this will give them some control over the meaning making process. However, each student will have **unique experiences** from their everyday lives that will also have an influence. These are less accessible to the teacher and can confound his or her best efforts as unexpected

and erroneous connections may be made, leading to alternative conceptions or 'misconceptions'. This is where the different perspectives mentioned above come from.

Let's take an example. A primary school science teacher may have done his or her best to teach children that freezing is a process that involves a substance changing from its liquid state to its solid state as it cools down. S/he may well have exemplified this by looking at water becoming ice; s/he may also have attempted to support the generalisation of the concept by looking at other liquids freezing – liquid gold becoming solid gold, for example. Some children will construct the intended understanding. Others might signal their understanding (perhaps they can recite the account of freezing given above), but their strong everyday association of freezing with 'being cold' will prevent them from accepting the solidification of gold at hundreds of degrees centigrade as an example of the phenomenon. Still others might have come to regard any example of solidification as an example of freezing, including an egg becoming solid as it is cooked or a resin setting (processes involving chemical change). There is a **mismatch** between the perspective of the teacher (the perspective of science) and the various perspectives of the children. By the way, this scenario arises from my discussion with three Year 5 pupils in 2019, transcribed in Appendix A. Have a look – can you see the different perspectives of the students and me?

A wider range of perspectives may be formed during the interpretation of a poem, or an historical event. In these situations there may be a greater range of 'acceptable' perspectives, with no one authoritative point of view, though the teacher will wish to engage students with perspectives that have stood the test of time (the 'best that has been thought and said').

So how can we make these different perspectives **visible** and come to understand them and the experiences that have given rise to them? How can teachers and students come to see from the other perspective? How can they bring their perspectives into creative tension in a way that gives rise to some kind of resolution (be that the student's understanding of the teacher's view – and *vice versa* - or the generation of new perspectives through some kind of synthesis)? Engaging students in dialogue is one useful way of doing these things. The recognition and valuing of different perspectives is central to dialogue, as is developing the capacity to visit different perspectives, to inhabit them for a while and understand where they come from without losing sight of one's own point of view. From a position of value and understanding can come **challenge**; where appropriate, a dialectical process or a process of argumentation can lead towards resolution (or at least make people aware that their view is contestable).

Another 'stance' that influences my view of dialogic pedagogy is a stance on the relationship between dialogue and thinking, and on the possibility of teaching thinking. When we call somebody into dialogue, we are calling them to think (not to passively accept an authoritative voice). In this sense thinking does not just mean a rational process that goes on within the brain of the individual, but a process that goes on between people and

perspectives; it is a social process – a process of **thinking together** (Vygotsky famously suggested that higher mental functions are learned through social interaction before becoming a feature of the internal thinking of an individual).

This act of thinking is essential for making meaning and retaining knowledge - in a well-known aphorism, the cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham tells us that 'memory is the residue of thought'. Good thinking together is dependent on a sound grasp of relevant prior knowledge, and perhaps on an understanding of the styles of reasoning that have developed within the relevant disciplines (science, maths, history etc.). It is also enhanced by the more general dispositions learned in dialogues, such as curiosity, an openness to other perspectives and a willingness to change one's own perspective. The disposition and ability to seek to understand and inhabit another perspective and to hold it in a creative tension with one's own perspective is essential, and is something that can be learned through the regular practice of dialogue. The relationship between knowledge, dialogue and thinking is a **synergistic** one.

And **relationships**, of course, are critical in dialogue. Professor Rupert Wegerif (2018) argues that relationship is a precursor to thinking together. The ability to be drawn into dialogue with the other is contingent on seeing and valuing the other as a potential source of meaning and understanding; not just as a source of information, but as a source of difference in relation to which one's own perspective can grow. In this sense, an orientation of openness to and interest in other people and other ideas is fundamental, and so, therefore, is the environment of the classroom and the relationships between students and teachers.

Wegerif also argues that **education itself** can be seen as a drawing into dialogue. This doesn't just mean the spatially and temporally bound dialogues of the classroom, but the ongoing dialogues of the disciplines and of humanity as a whole. The knowledge taught in schools is the best answers we currently have to the best questions that have been asked so far; it is not fixed and final but ever-changing. Our job as educators is to bring our students up to speed with the dialogue so far, and to help them, **all of them**, to come to value their own voice so that they can take it forward into the future. Sympathy with this dialogic view of education as a whole seems to me to demand sympathy with dialogic pedagogy.

I would argue that dialogic pedagogy is fundamentally **democratic**, not just in the way it values everybody's voice, but in the way it prepares them to participate in public discourse and deliberation. Hopefully a grounding in dialogue will give students a thirst for truth (or the best version of it they can attain), an openness to the 'unforced force of the better argument', and some protection from indoctrination, ideology and fake news.

One final stance I would like to share at this point is an **ethical** one. I am fond of a quoting Dmitri Nikulin who suggested that dialogue might be '*the* therapy against the misrecognition

of one human by another'. In teaching students to engage in dialogue, we are giving them something still more valuable than an academic education: we are giving them the abilities and dispositions they need to be interested in, to value and to come to understand (if not to agree with) their fellow human beings, which might represent a source of the care and kindness that our world so badly needs.

Evidence of Impact

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has carried out research on the impact of both Robin Alexander's Dialogic Teaching and Philosophy for Children (P4C – a specific example of dialogic pedagogy that I will return to in a later post).

In Alexander's case a relatively short but intensive intervention led to a conclusion that, 'This trial found consistent, positive effects in English, science and maths for all children in Year 5, equivalent to about 2 months additional progress.' You can access the research **here**.

This is consistent with the findings of the P4C study, which concluded that, 'Year 4 and 5 pupils doing Philosophy for Children made about two months' additional progress in Key Stage 2 maths and reading compared with other pupils.' You can access the research **here**.

A team from the University of Cambridge led by Professor Christine Howe, Dr Sarah Hennessy and Professor Neil Mercer has published results of a project looking into the impact of dialogic interaction on attainment, concluding that children improved significantly more in maths and English when a teachers encouraged pupils to participate in dialogue, to elaborate on their thoughts / ideas and to question each other's ideas. You can access this research **here**.

Summary

So in summary dialogic pedagogy is useful because it helps students to gain meaningful knowledge, to think well and to participate in a deliberative democracy in which all perspectives are valued and understood. It has the power to make the world a better place. So as an interested teacher, where can you start? The **next post** will offer some suggestions focusing on developing an awareness of the different types of teacher talk we use and the purposes for which we use them.

Bibliography

For a deeper exploration of the nature of dialogue in relation to education try:

Phillipson, N. and Wegerif, R. 2017, *Dialogic Education: Mastering core concepts through thinink together*, Routledge, Abingdon

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See also:

Alexander, R. 2020, *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*, Routledge, Abingdon

Mercer, M. and Littleton, K. 2013, *Interthinking: Putting Talk to Work*, Routledge, Abingdon

Wegerif, R. 2018, *A Dialogic Theory of Teaching Thinking* in Kerslake, L. and Wegerif, R. *Theory of Teaching Thinking*, Routledge, Abingdon

Moving away from the context of education, try:

Sleap, F. and Sener, O. 2013, *Dialogue Theories*, The Dialogue Society, London

Isaacs, I. 1999, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, Doubleday, New York

A Teacher's Guide to Dialogic Pedagogy Part 2: The How – Getting Started

Introduction

In the previous post I described **dialogic pedagogy** as involving teachers and students talking and thinking in a way that seeks out and values different perspectives, and uses them to develop understanding. The broad term 'dialogic pedagogy' encompasses diverse approaches to its enactment in the classroom. Notable approaches include Professor Robin Alexander's **Dialogic Teaching**; **Thinking Together** as developed by Professor Rupert Wegerif, Professor Neil Mercer and Dr Lyn Dawes; Professor Lauren Resnick's Accountable Talk; Roger Sutcliffe's **Philosophical Teaching** and **Philosophy for Children** (P4C) as developed by Professor Matthew Lipman. Follow the links or see the bibliography to find out more about them.

My own classroom approach, outlined in this and subsequent posts, is in reality a synthesis of those listed above. I refer to it as **Thinking Together** as it has largely grown out of my writing with Rupert Wegerif in which we have re-visited the Thinking Together approach, though it is also connected closely to my experience with P4C. I am certainly indebted to all those listed, especially Wegerif, Sutlcliffe and Mercer who I am fortunate enough to have worked with.

Types of Teacher Talk

One way to get started is to consider the different types of talk used in your classroom / school. This can involve both student talk and teacher talk, in small groups and as a whole-class. Let's focus first on teacher talk. From the outset I want to be clear that dialogue is **not** the only type of talk valuable to teaching and learning. I remember the saying that a teacher should be 'a guide on the side, not a sage on the stage'. I don't agree. Teaching is a complex business and must make use of various ways of communicating; there is a place for 'telling' and there is a place for dialogue.

Robin Alexander provides a more nuanced '**repertoire**' of teacher talk types comprised of rote, recitation, instruction, exposition, discussion, deliberation, argumentation and dialogue (though he suggests that discussion, deliberation and argumentation can be a part of dialogue). Another helpful (and somewhat simpler) taxonomy is provided by **Eduardo Mortimer** and **Philip Scott** in their 2003 book 'Making Meaning in Secondary Science Classrooms'.
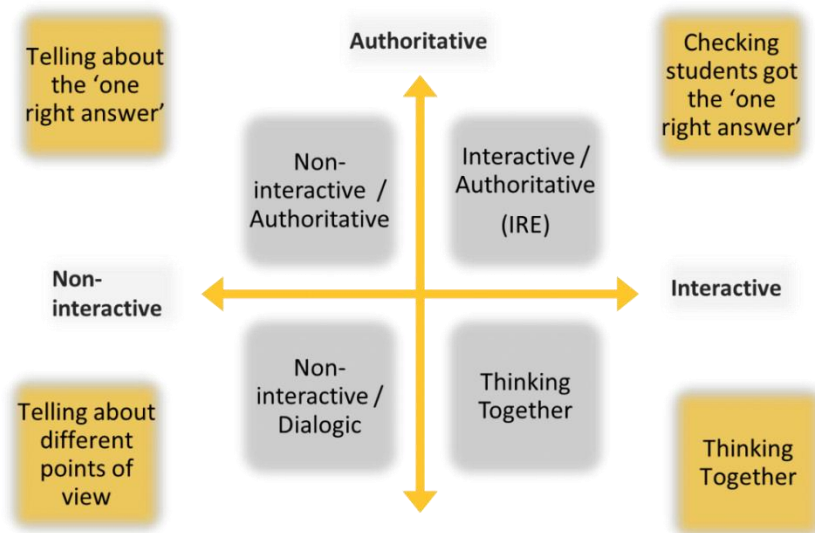
Like Alexander, Mortimer and Scott acknowledge that teachers – legitimately – use different talk-based approaches to develop ideas with their students. They refer to these as different '**communicative approaches**', and offer four categories of communicative approach based on two dimensions. The first of these considers where the talk lies on a scale from dialogic to authoritative:

- **Dialogic**: Attention is paid to more than one perspective; different perspectives are held in tension together
- **Authoritative**: Attention is focused on just one point of view – usually that of the teacher or the discipline

The second dimension considers where the talk lies on a scale from interactive to non-interactive:

- **Interactive**: Talk allows for the participation of different people (including students)
- **Non-interactive:** The teacher talks and other people (the students) are excluded / listen

The diagram below shows how these dimensions give us four categories of talk (the simpler descriptions in the yellow boxes are mine):

Telling about the 'one right answer'

Authoritative

Checking students got the 'one right answer'

Non-interactive / Authoritative

Interactive / Authoritative (IRE)

Non-interactive

Interactive

Telling about different points of view

Non-interactive / Dialogic

Thinking Together

Thinking Together

Let's consider each category in turn:

Authoritative / Non-interactive (or telling about the one right answer). Perhaps the most obvious example of this is **lecturing**, which might involve instructing, explaining, describing and demonstrating in order to convey information to the students (about a concept or a procedure, for example) without requiring them to speak.

Authoritative / Interactive (or checking that the students got / leading students to the one right answer). This is an important one, because it is ubiquitous. It's easy to imagine that whenever we are verbally interacting with students we are being dialogic. Perhaps this notion can most easily be challenged by considering the well-known '**IRE**' (Initiation-Response-Evaluation) pattern of teacher-student interaction. Consider the brief exchange below:

T: So we can only see the moon because the light from the sun does what?

S1: Passes through it, sir

T: No

S2: Bounces off it, sir

T: Bounces – reflects off it – yes, well done, that's right

Here the teacher **initiates** the exchange with a question. The question is closed in the sense that the teacher already has a single right answer in mind; the intention in this case is to check whether the students have grasped the answer – are they able to recite what has been taught? The question provokes brief **responses**. Rather than opening up wrong

answers to reveal what they might show about the state of the students' learning, the teacher dismisses them; s/he is only interested in the right answer. This, once given, is re-enforced through the teacher's approval – in other words the teacher quickly **evaluates** student responses. This type of exchange is also common in rhetorical sequences in which a teacher has already determined the end point of the exchange and questions are designed to elicit the desired answer that allows the teacher to make his or her point.

Dialogic / Non-interactive (or telling about different points of view). In this case the teacher is doing all the talking, but s/he acknowledges **different perspectives** and holds them in tension, perhaps engaging in a one-person dialogue (remember that '*dia*' does not mean 'two', but rather 'through' or 'across'. You can reason through or across different perspectives on your own). A teacher might explore different interpretations of a poem, an historical event or a set of data, or s/he might make reference to the views expressed by students as s/he explains his or her own point of view.

Dialogic / Interactive (or thinking together). Consider the transcript below (based on a conversation about an image from Armin Greder's 'The Island'):

T: Look at the image. What do you notice?

S1: Her eyes and how wide they are, miss.

T: Why are her eyes worth noticing – what might they tell us?

S1: She's scared – well, terrified.

T: Go on…

S1: She's scared because she's seen the man and she thinks he might hurt her.

T: Would anyone like to say more about that?

S2: I don't think she's scared, I think she's shocked 'cos the man looks so bad 'cos they starved him.

In this case the question is an open one – there is no one right answer available. The teacher shows interest in and value for the students' contributions, and rather than evaluating them, s/he opens them up to further exploration. Instead of an IRE pattern, we have an IRFRFRF pattern, where F stands for '**feedback**' – a contribution from the teacher (or even better another student) that doesn't close the exchange, but opens it up.

It is possible to do this with closed questions too. Look at the extended transcript shared **in Appendix A**. The teacher – me - is working towards getting Student 1 to see the 'scientific point of view', and yet refrains for a good time from an authoritative explanation. Can this be recognised as thinking together? Is it of value? It's important to note that in this example

the teacher has an '**accountability to accurate subject knowledge**' (here I borrow a phrase from Accountable Talk); the dialogic interaction plays an important role in helping the student to re-construct her understanding, but of course she can't be 'made' to accept the teacher's perspective. However, the teacher has a responsibility to reiterate the scientific definition of freezing, perhaps using an authoritative / non-interactive communicative approach (or preferably a dialogic non-interactive approach that connects to the students' views).

In both these examples we are giving the students the opportunity to reflect, to question, to make connections and to make meaning. Such episodes also provide teachers with **vital feedback** about the learning that is taking place. It's easy to see how thinking together might complement a more authoritative input; you know what you tried to 'teach', but is that what has been 'learned'?

An important message here is that **all** of these approaches have a role to play. Careful expositions by teachers are undoubtedly valuable, and the use of IRE routines to re-inforce key learning is important. And of course teachers may switch from one communicative approach to the next in a fluent and effective way during a single teaching and learning episode. **BUT** –researchers tell us that they see relatively little dialogic / interactive teaching. Authoritative / interactive teaching, characterised by the IRE routine, remains dominant.

Some Practical Suggestions

The task, then (assuming that one accepts the value of dialogic pedagogy as outlined in the previous post), is not to put an end to lecturing and rhetorical questioning, but to **increase the proportion** of dialogic / interactive communication in the 'mix' of teacher talk – to encourage more thinking together.

One starting point is to become more aware of the different communicative approaches you use, the extent to which you use each one, and the purposes for which each is useful. Here are some things to try:

- **Read** the descriptions of the four communicative approaches again. Reflect on your teaching – can you identify examples of your use of each one? Which do you use most often – what's your gut feeling?
- Share the descriptions with a colleague – a teaching assistant or someone interested in working with you to introduce Thinking Together. Ask them to **observe** one or two of your lessons and record the different approaches you use. As you reflect on the session together, can you see a correlation between the approach you use and your

teaching purpose? Were you using the communicative approach most suited to what you were trying to achieve? You could also record your teaching to support this kind of reflection.

- Repeat the exercise for a **different subject** (if you teach more than one). Does the nature of the subject influence the mix of communicative approaches you use?
- Download this **checklist** of teacher behaviours associated with dialogic pedagogy (it's not comprehensive or authoritative!). Ask a colleague to make a note of which behaviours they see and which they don't (and by all means edit the list).
- As you **plan** a lesson, think about the different communicative approaches you might use in different teaching episodes. Would it be useful to use a Thinking Together approach at any point? Why?

In the **next post** we'll look at ways in which a teacher can **plan** for an episode of Thinking Together. We'll discuss the 'shift' the teacher makes from a mode of 'putting in' to a mode of **facilitating** dialogue. We'll think about how the classroom layout affects communicative approach and share some approaches to questioning that will support teachers to draw their students into **dialogue**.

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A Teacher's Guide to Dialogic Pedagogy Part 3: The How - Facilitation

'It's funny. You don't have to think too hard when you talk to a teacher.' Holden Caulfield in The Catcher in the Rye

In the **previous post** I suggested that Eduardo Mortimer and Philip Scott's categorisation of classroom talk offers a useful tool for teachers as they reflect on the different '**communicative approaches**' they use. I also suggested that it would be useful for many teachers to increase the proportion of dialogic / interactive talk (or **Thinking Together**) in their classrooms, and perhaps to reduce the proportion of authoritative / interactive talk (characterised by IRE sequences) used. In this post I will retain the focus on teacher talk and offer some suggestions as to how the transition from authoritative to dialogic interaction could be made.

Orientation to Dialogue

Perhaps the first step is to be aware of the **purposes** of our interactions with students. IRE exchanges are not 'bad practice' – they serve a purpose. This purpose is generally connected to the transmission of information: 'putting in', or re-enforcing what has been 'put in'. If we make a decision to switch to a dialogic approach we might be more concerned with understanding what sense has been made of the information that has been put in and with seeking to facilitate reflection, meaning making and enquiry (in the sense of creating space for students to ask questions about what is not yet understood).

This shift in purpose necessitates a shift in our **questioning**. Instead of initiating interactions with questions that are checking recall and require brief responses from students, we need

to make a shift to asking questions that probe understanding, facilitate the making of connections and require more elaborated responses. We might also ask more open questions (questions to which there is more than one possible right answer). I won't say more about initiating questions here (though this is obviously an important aspect of practice), but will rather turn to what the teacher might do with the students' first response that might **open up** a dialogic exchange.

In his 2020 book 'A Dialogic Teaching Companion', Robin Alexander emphasises the importance of '**the third turn**' describing it as the moment at which 'an exchange can stop or continue, when it can open up the student's thinking or close it down, when feedback can be replaced with feed-forward'. I tend to think that the pivotal moment comes even before the third turn is spoken and lies in the teacher's attitude or **orientation** to the responding student. Here are a couple of 'golden rules':

Be Interested!

Participants in a dialogue need to **listen deeply**, with care and respect for the other and their ideas. They need to go beyond listening to his or her words, and be attuned to the thoughts and feelings that give rise to them. If a teacher wants to be in dialogue with a student, then s/he must listen – really listen. That means not thinking about the next question, or the next activity, and not listening only for the right or expected answer, but being fully focused on the student, giving them time to think and find their words and actively seeking to understand them and their perspective (see below).

Suspend Judgement

Remember that in an IRE exchange the student's response is **evaluated** by the teacher, often in a way that closes the exchange down: 'Yes, that's right,' or 'No, that's not what I'm looking for'. I think we find ourselves making these judgements in our minds even while the student is speaking. Try to resist or **suspend** that thought process and replace it with an openness to what the student wants to say. ('Suspend judgement' is a phrase I picked up from reading the work of dialogue expert and physicist David Bohm – see his book On Dialogue).

The Third Turn

Ok, so now we have heard the student. What comes next rather depends on the context, but here are a couple of closely related 'moves' you can make that are very often useful, and which have been shown by **Cambridge researchers** to be an important feature of classroom talk that leads to increased attainment:

Encourage Elaboration

A first response to a question, particularly a challenging one, may well be partial or stilted. If more needs to be said, then simply encourage the speaker to **elaborate**. Responses such as '**Go on**' or '**Say more**' are sometimes all that is needed.

Seek to Understand

If you are still not clear what the student wants to communicate, or if you want to know more about the thought process, prior learning or experience that gave rise to their contribution, you may need to ask a **response question**. Try some of these:

- Can you explain that in another way?
- Can you give me an example of that?
- What do you mean by…?
- What makes you say that…?
- Why is it important that…?
- Can you say how you worked that out / arrived at that position?
- Can you summarise that (or 'give me the headlines')?

Once we have understood, we can turn our attention to supporting meaning making and encouraging the kind of thinking that might help students to re-construct their understanding. **Socratic questioning** can be a great help here. There are many published lists of Socratic questions, and various ways of categorising them according to purpose. What follows is not intended to be a comprehensive list, but might give you a useful starting point as you look to expand your repertoire of 'third turn' responses:

Help Students to Make Connections and Distinctions

Making meaning of new ideas or concepts and refining our understanding of existing ones involves making **connections** between new information and existing knowledge, between bits of knowledge that had seemed unrelated and between abstract ideas and concrete experience. It also involves making **distinctions** between one concept and another. Try questions like these to aid the connection making process:

- Is there a link between (Concept X) and (Concept Y)?
- Is this connected to what James was talking about earlier?
- What might this have to do with what we learned last lesson?
- Are these two completely different problems or are they similar in some way?
- Has anyone had any experience of this (phenomenon, emotion, behaviour etc.)?
- What is the distinction between X and Y?
- Is what Farah is saying different from what Mike is saying? In what way?
- How are these things the same / different?

Ask for Reasons and Evidence

Perhaps being able to give a reason for one's views is the first step towards being able to construct a logical **argument**. I think it might also help with the process of revealing one's ignorance and reconstructing one's understanding. Sometimes I find that as I attempt to articulate my reasons I become more aware of the strength or weakness (or baselessness!) of my position; possible **counter arguments** become visible and I begin to re-think my position even before someone responds. Perhaps I am drawn into a dialogue with myself. I also make my thinking more available to others; a student's attempt to justify their position provides a teacher with something of a window onto their understanding (though we need to be wary that what is being shared is a product of the social context). Try questions like these to draw out a student's reasoning and to encourage them to consider the evidence base for their position:

- Are there reasons to support that?
- Why do you say that?
- Is there an example of that?
- Is that consistent with the evidence?

Encourage Participation and Collaboration

If the dialogue is part of a teaching episode involving the whole class, then everyone should be involved in **Thinking Together**. While this doesn't (and for practical reasons cannot) mean that everybody should speak to the whole class, it does mean that everyone should be called to think. Securing high levels of participation in dialogic exchanges was another factor that contributed to improved attainment, according to the **Cambridge research**.

This means that you need to resist the temptation to respond to every contribution. A first 'move' might be to **wait** – give others time to think, and to respond. One of the questions suggested above might then be offered to the whole group, who are, after all, supposed to be Thinking Together. Rather than asking the last speaker 'Do **you** have a reason to support that?' ask the group: 'Are there reasons to support that?' In a dialogue ideas are shared as resources for the whole group to think with – not my ideas and your ideas, but our ideas. This joining of minds (or **Interthinking** to use Neil Mercer's term) should produce better thinking than an individual mind. Opportunities for **paired talk** will enhance participation and lead to richer contributions to the whole group (don't underestimate the power of 'Think-Pair-Share').

You might find some of these 'moves' useful too:

- David, could you ask Sophie to explain her reasoning to us / give us an example of that etc.?
- Do we need to ask Michael a question so that we can understand him more clearly?
- Would anyone like Zainab to say more about that?

- Do others agree with Alison's position? Can you say why?
- Is there a problem with Mohammed's position?
- Are there counter-arguments / examples?
- What might happen if we follow Johnny's suggestion?

Substantive Questioning and Question Plans

The moves and questions suggested above are **context independent**. As you seek to support students to deepen / re-construct their understanding of particular concepts and ideas, then you will of course need to ask questions focused on those concepts or ideas, perhaps in response to any misconceptions that may arise. **Subject knowledge** is a vital component of dialogic pedagogy – it's very hard to ask valuable questions in the moment if you don't really 'know you stuff'.

Thinking through likely misconceptions in advance, and planning questions to challenge these or to require the group to **think harder** about the key concepts can be very helpful. The transcript shared **in Appendix A** captures part of a dialogic exchange between me and a group of three primary school pupils. I had given the pupils some descriptions of changes involving materials and asked them to connect them to the changes of state involved: melting, freezing, evaporating and condensing (you can see the 'answers' below). In advance of the session I prepared the question plan shared in **Appendix B**. Although not all the questions proved useful, just the act of sitting down and thinking the ideas through put me in a stronger position to facilitate the dialogue. Of course, such plans will take different forms depending on the subject involved.

Planning a Session Around Thinking Together

I often refer to tasks like the one above as '**talk tasks**' (I should say that I think this task originated from the University of York Science Education Group's website). They are part of a session deliberately planned around interactive-dialogic exchanges. I might give groups of three pupils the opportunity to engage in dialogue around the activity away from the influence of the teacher (see the next post for details of how we might increase the chance of this talk being productive), then show them my answers and ask them to consider where they disagree with me. They then bring their thoughts and questions to a plenary session (with a circular seating arrangement – see below) in which I facilitate whole-class dialogue. You can see an example of my planning, which involves a consideration of the communicative approach used at each stage of the session, **here**.

In a session such as this I must remember that I have an **accountability to accurate subject knowledge**. In the dialogue about changes of state, I hope I was successful in getting Pupil 1 to recognise that there was an inconsistency between her perspective of freezing and mine, or that of the subject. Perhaps that's all I can realistically hope to achieve – the raising of doubt ('I... I'm confused now'), the expanded awareness of another point of view. Nevertheless, I feel that I have a responsibility at the end of such a session to switch back from a dialogic to an **authoritative** communicative approach, to 'step out of the circle' (see below) and to re-inforce the view of the subject. Dialogues should not end in shared ignorance. (The need for this depends on context and may of course be different in other subjects - English, PSHE or RE, for example, or in philosophical dialogues).

A Word About Classroom Layout

If a session involving an extended dialogic / interactive exchange is part of your planning, then it is worth considering **seating arrangements**. If you want students to genuinely listen and respond to each other, it really does help if they can see each other, so consider a circular or horse-shoe arrangement. A more subtle point here is the positioning of the teacher. Moving away from a position of authority at the front of the class and taking a place in circle can be a useful signal to both yourself and the students that the communicative approach is changing. Within the circle the teacher is no longer putting in, but is **facilitating** the thinking of the students.

In the **next post** I will shift the emphasis from teacher talk to student talk. For a dialogue to be possible, we need all participants to be open, engaged and thinking together. At the end of the day we are only teaching if our words are contributing to learning, and to learn the students need to **think** and **talk** and join in **dialogue** with each other, with the teacher and with the subject. In order to teach *through* dialogue, we also need to teach *for* dialogue.

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A Teacher's Guide to Dialogic Pedagogy Part 4: Teaching for Dialogue

'(Dialogic pedagogy) is not something that you can do **to** your students, but something you have to create **with** them. It is born out of relationship.'

Posts 2 and 3 of this series focus on the role of the teacher in **dialogic pedagogy**. In **Post 2** Mortimer and Scott's categorisation of the different communicative approaches available to the teacher are offered as a basis for reflection on the different types of classroom talk and their purposes. In **Post 3** the role of the teacher in facilitating dialogic / interactive talk (or **Thinking Together**) is explored. In this post we turn our attention to the role of the students in creating an environment in which Thinking Together becomes possible and can flourish, allowing them to make meaning of what they have been taught.

A Difficult Truth

It is not possible to 'make' dialogue happen. A teacher can be orientated to dialogue and ask all the questions and make all the moves suggested in **Post 3**, and the students can still respond in a closed way. If there is no real interest in or **care** for the subject under discussion, then dialogue will not happen. If students fear that 'wrong' responses will lead to humiliation, then dialogue will not happen. If students are continually asking themselves what it is that the teacher wants them to say, then dialogue will not happen. I could go on. Meaning making requires different perspectives to be shared, understood, and brought into tension with each other, and it requires students to care and to take up the invitation to find

their voice and to express new ideas in their own words in response to the words of others. It is an **active process**, and we cannot force students to act.

Perhaps all this hints at a difficult truth: dialogic pedagogy will not bear fruit overnight. It is not something you can do *to* your students, but something you have to create *with* them. Dialogue is born out of relationship. It is contingent on your ability to reveal the beauty of your subject and to connect it to students' lives, to stretch out your hand and offer to lead the way on an effortful journey, and it is contingent on them grasping that outstretched hand. Such relationships don't form overnight, but are built with care over time. At the end of this post I will discuss the idea of the **Community of Enquiry**, which in my experience has been the most effective way of building such relationships and creating the space in which dialogue is possible. But let's start with something simpler.

Ground Rules

While there is no algorithm that students can follow to lead them into dialogue, there are skills and dispositions that make dialogue more likely, and deepen it when it happens, and these can be learned. One way of introducing them is to articulate them as a set of '**ground rules**' to be followed when Thinking Together is required (whether that be in small groups without the teacher, or in a whole class facilitated dialogue). The ground rules can be offered by the teacher, but they can also be **co-constructed** with the students. In my experience the co-construction model works best; it is dialogic in itself in that it values the students' ideas, and, as the rules are kept under review and modified in the light of experience, it models the idea that our current knowledge and understanding is provisional and ever-evolving. Here's one way of running an introductory session:

- Ask the students to match phrases such as 'a **lecture**', 'a **chat**', 'a **speech**', 'a **squabble**', 'a **debate**', 'a **Q&A session**' and 'a **dialogue**' to corresponding images (artists' illustrations work well) or film clips. What distinctions do they make between these different types of talk?
- Enquire as to whether the different talk types could be used for different **purposes**. Which do they experience in the classroom? (Older students might be interested in the communicative approaches discussed in Post 2, and might even take on a role as co-researchers, monitoring their use in the classroom);
- Consider which **talk type(s)** might be most useful when working together to solve a maths problem, sharing thoughts in response to a piece of writing, film, music or poetry, or planning a science experiment;
- Does this change if the **teacher** is present? What if the teacher doesn't have the right answer, or at least is interested in more than one answer?
- Think together about how you would all need to **behave** in order to make talk in the above contexts productive. What ground rules would you need to follow?
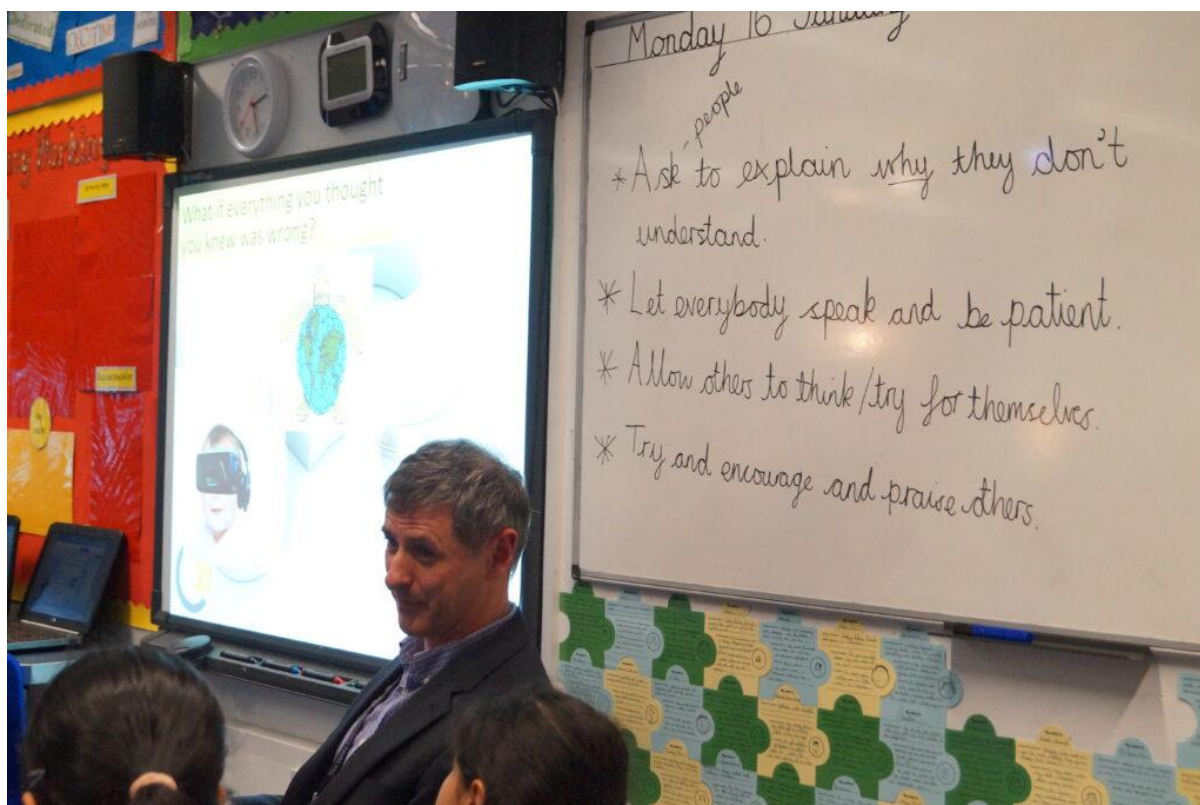
The suggested rules will serve as a starting point, but should not be 'set in tablets of stone'. The authors of the original Thinking Together materials (Neil Mercer, Lyn Dawes and Rupert Wegerif) intended that the ground rules used would emerge from the students' developing awareness of what worked and what did not work for them; they would be somewhat different in each context and would evolve during a period of reflective practice. They suggest that some common features that might be expected from a useful set of ground rules include commitments to:

- **sharing** relevant knowledge;
- **listening** to everyone's ideas attentively and treating them respectfully;
- accepting that claims should be **challenged** and that the **reasons** underpinning claims and challenges should be shared and explored;
- actively seeking and considering **alternatives** before any decisions are taken;
- taking shared **responsibility** for decisions;
- reaching **agreement** whenever possible.

Neil Mercer points out that encouraging students to reach agreement is thought to be valuable as it encourages students to engage more deeply with the views of others and to give more consideration to their own ideas and the reasons underpinning them.

The Importance of Reflection

Whatever the set of ground rules that are established, deliberate and reflective practice is essential if they are to have the desired impact on the quality of talk. The value of **metacognition** and self-regulation to effective learning has become well-recognised (you can find a useful summary of the evidence from the EEF **here**). Metacognition involves developing a conscious awareness of the strategies used to tackle a problem and developing the capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies and adapt and apply them accordingly. The ground rules represent an explicit statement of the strategies used to make Thinking Together effective. Teachers can guide students to identify when specific ground rules are being followed and to reflect on the impact they have on the dialogue and on progress towards tackling the problem at hand. Reflection on the ground rules and their application may prompt some revision of the rules and it will allow the group to identify skills and dispositions that they need to focus on.

Making Progress

If you want to take Thinking Together a little further, then you need to think about the notion of **progression**. You might start by exploring the way that **language** can be used as a tool for Thinking Together. Consider these 'sentence starters': how might they add to the students' ability to enact the ground rules and Think Together?

- I think… / I believe… / In my opinion… (because)…
- I wonder if… / Maybe… / What if…?
- Go ahead, X…
- I think what X is saying is…
- Let me explain that more clearly…
- An example of that is…
- So in summary…
- Building on something X said…
- I agree with / disagree with X (because)…
- I see what you are saying, X, but…
- I think I have a different point of view to X…
- I think there is another way of looking at this…
- My reasons are…
- The evidence for that is…
- I think there is a distinction between…
- I think X and Y are connected…
- I think I've had an experience of this…

You might not introduce so many possibilities all at once, but rather start with simple examples that encourage students to share their ideas and build from there. Useful language can be on display for the students during episodes of Thinking

Together. Discussing the language and its use, and trying it out in skills building sessions might be valuable. What's the difference between '**I believe…**' and '**I wonder if…**'? What different functions do they perform? As their dialogue develops in sophistication, consider what further language would support them. (As you consider adding to the range of cognitive moves that are consciously made during these sessions, **Thinking Moves A-Z** from **Dialogue Works** has a great deal of potential to add value).

You may also find it useful to introduce students to the questions suggested for teacher use in **Post 3**. It is desirable that the students take increasing ownership (**self-regulation**) of the Thinking Together process and come to see learning as an active process of shared enquiry, so challenge them to ask each other the questions that encourage elaboration, seek to understand, search for connections and distinctions and so on. You can find more extensive suggestions for useful language (questions and response stems) on the spreadsheet shared in **this post**.

You may want to introduce some simple skills-building activities. For example, an activity I have used to explore ways of disagreeing with others can be seen **here**. A group wanting to develop their capacity to seek to understand each other might find an activity like **this** helpful.
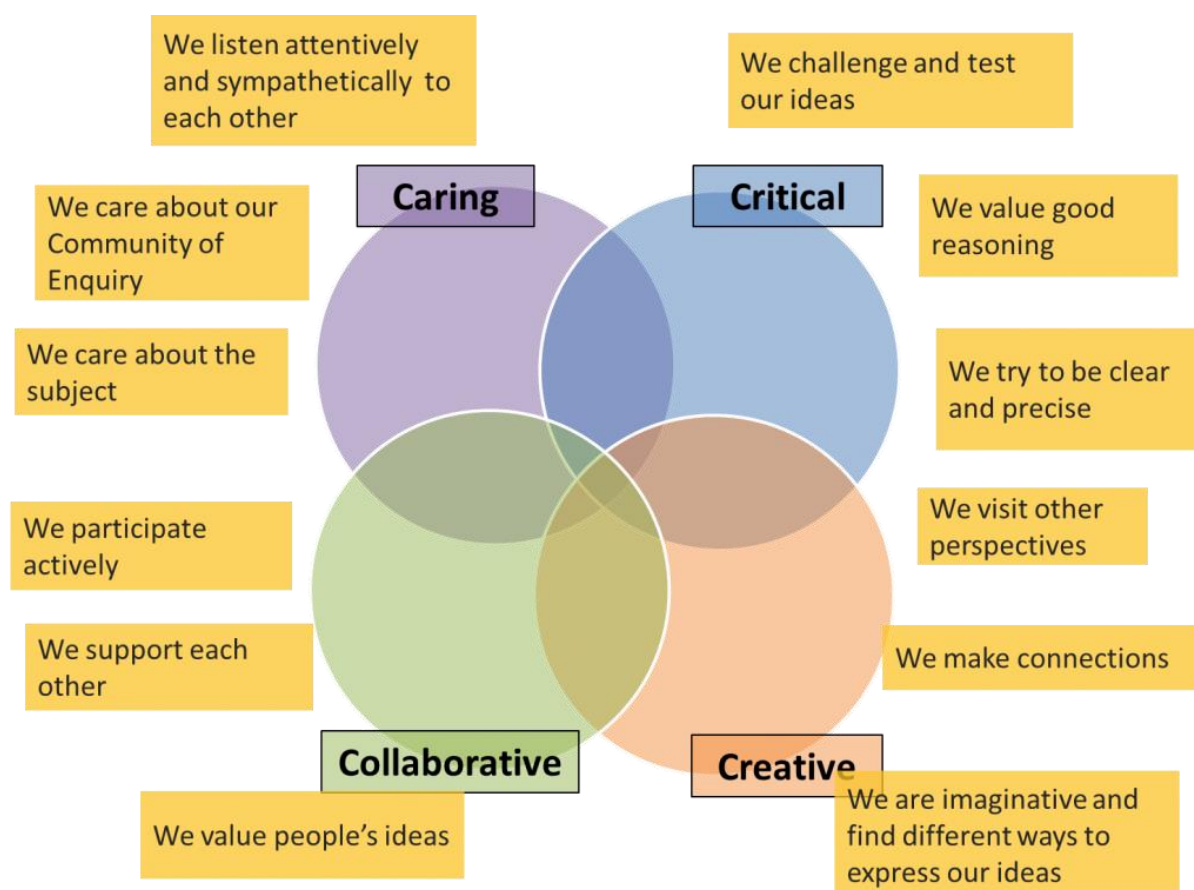
By '**teaching for dialogue**' in this way we begin to give the students the tools they need to create spaces in which they can Think Together and socially construct **meaning**. The use of ground rules is a simple approach that need not take up much time and will help to transform the classroom culture. I want to end this series of posts by sharing another powerful approach that has the potential to transform schools and to have an impact on the wider community.

The Community of Enquiry

The Community of Enquiry (CoE) has its roots in pragmatic philosophy and was appropriated for use in **Philosophy for Children** (P4C) by Professor Matthew Lipman in the 1960s. Groups practicing P4C put time aside (perhaps an hour per week) for raising and Thinking Together about philosophical questions. The group becomes a CoE as they develop a sense of **care** for each other and for the questions and concepts they explore, as they learn to **collaborate** – to identify with the group in all its plurality – and as they develop the **critical** and **creative**

habits of mind needed to make progress towards 'good' answers. They are supported in this endeavour by the 4Cs framework, which I think offers a more nuanced and holistic approach than a simple set of ground rules :

We listen attentively and sympathetically to each other

We care about our Community of Enquiry

We care about the subject

Caring

Critical

We challenge and test our ideas

We value good reasoning

We try to be clear and precise

We participate actively

We support each other

We visit other perspectives

We make connections

Collaborative

Creative

We value people's ideas

We are imaginative and find different ways to express our ideas

Ground rules can be built up to articulate what each of the 4Cs involves (those shown above are just an example), and over a period of reflective practice these ground rules can increase in sophistication, allowing the CoE to make progress. I have written about the 4Cs **here**, and **here** I have shared some resources for the development of progress over time.

In my experience this practice is a very effective way of learning to engage in dialogue – for students and for teachers. The open nature of the philosophical questions asked in P4C mean that the normal 'rules of the game' of classroom talk (see **Post 1**) are changed. The absence of 'correct answers' makes it easier for teachers to practise facilitation, for students to realise that their ideas are valuable to the process of building shared understanding, and for all to understand the value of different perspectives.

I would always argue that dialogue is a profoundly important end point **in its own right**, as are the care and wisdom developed through P4C. But a CoE soon realises that dialogue and dialogic enquiry aren't constrained to the P4C session, but rather they **spread out** from this

source. With a little encouragement (such as the use of the facilitation techniques shared in **Post 3**) they spread across the whole curriculum, with teachers and students being more able to identify occasions when they are valuable and being more confident to Think Together. And these forms of talk and thought spread beyond the boundaries of the school and into the **lives** of the participants and through them into the wider community where they are so badly needed.

P4C is more expensive to implement and more time consuming than the approach to Thinking Together described in the rest of this series of posts, but is very much worth considering if your school is committed to dialogic pedagogy.

Conclusion

In **Post One** I make the case for the value of **dialogic pedagogy** in terms of its impact on teaching and learning, its impact on thinking (both together and as an individual) and its impact on democracy. I believe that dialogue represents a better way of being, and is desperately needed in today's divided world. Teaching students how to Think Together should be a central goal of schooling, not just because it improves attainment, but because it improves our experience of life. By extension I feel that dialogic pedagogy should be a part of Teacher Education.

There is no switch or procedure that can produce dialogue in any given context, but if we **care** enough to allow our interest in the other to possess us for a while, then we are likely to find a way in. Ultimately I think it is our orientation to **difference** that determines our access to dialogue - difference about politics, religion, football or the best way to solve a maths problem. As long as we are afraid of difference, the way will remain shut, but if we allow ourselves to be drawn towards difference, if we push our way in there to see what there is, then we may find that difference is the 'crack through which the light gets in' or the opening of spaces of dialogue and of mutual learning and meaning making. It is the differences between us that make it possible to **Think Together**. Hopefully some of the ideas shared in these posts will help to enhance your experiences of thinking, learning and living together in the classroom.

If you would like to know more about any of the approaches to dialogic pedagogy described on this website, then please do **contact me**.

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Acknowledgements

Appendix A: Thinking Together: A transcript

This is a transcript of a conversation that took place between myself and three Year 5 pupils in Sheffield in 2019. The pupils were experienced in Philosophy for Children – they had practiced dialogue before. They had learned about changes of state in their science lessons. I asked them to sort some scenarios according to the changes of state involved. The transcript focuses on the conversation around just one of the cards.

One pupil, **P3**, is reserved and contributes infrequently. The others, **P1** and **P2**, have different perspectives on what freezing means. As their teacher, **T,** I am facilitating their conversation and hoping to deepen their understanding of the concept of freezing.

P1:   So this one… lava turns into new rock after a volcano has erupted

P2:   Probably freezing 'cos it cools down – to turn into the rock

P1:   It wouldn't quite freeze, but it would cool down – so I reckon it's kind of freezing. It's sort of freezing.

T: Why aren't you sure – why do you say kind of freezing?

P1:   Because it isn't turning to ice, it's cooling down just a little bit, just enough to turn it back into rock, rather than it actually freezing

T: Do either of you disagree with that?

P2:   I think it might be freezing

P1:   So it's half on, half off then, because it's cooling down, but not freezing.

(Coming back to the problem a few minutes later, after discussing others)

P1:   So it's still not freezing, but it's a hard one…

P3:   Could it evaporate all the liquid that was in the lava?

P1:   I don't know whether the liquid would evaporate, but it might, 'cos, actually… I'm not sure

T: Tell me again – earlier you said you thought it was freezing but not really freezing…

P1:   It's just cooling down

T: What is freezing?

P1:   Freezing is when the temperature goes below zero in water, or a liquid solidifies

T: Does anybody disagree with that? Does anybody have a different view?

P2: Well, just to go against you a bit, you said liquid solidifies and lava is technically liquid and it has solidified

P1: Yes, so that's solidifying, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's freezing

T: You're making a distinction there between something solidifying as it cools down and something freezing. Why is that not freezing?

P1: That just returns to the state it was in before, which was rock, because it's been melted – the rock seems to have been melted and churned up by the lava from the volcano, and then it'll get cooler, but not freeze, and it'll just return to the state it was in before.

P2: I think it probably would be freezing, 'cos freezing, it doesn't have to be minus temperatures – if it's just cooling it is sort of freezing

P1: I still disagree with that because the science behind freezing is that things get so cold that they solidify, and this isn't what's happening – it just returns to its normal state, because it's been heated up, but it cools down slightly or…

T: You just said freezing means that things get so cold they solidify, but this isn't that because it's just returning to its normal state because it's cooled down quite a lot. What's the difference?

P1: It's not… It hasn't… The temperature hasn't gone below freezing, it's just… it hasn't actually frozen.

T: Right so this is the issue, one of you is suggesting that freezing is something that happens at zero degrees C or below, and you seem to be suggesting 'well not necessarily'. Can you give any examples of anything freezing other than water that might happen at a different temperature?

P2: Well, like chocolate, when you take it off the heat and just leave it, if you leave it for a matter of time it could even be twenty degrees, it would just set

P3: It would just solidify to its normal state

P2: Yeah

T: A bit like the lava – but would it have to be at zero degrees to do that?

P2 & P3: No

T: But it's still freezing?

P1: It's not freezing

T: What about if I took gold, and I don't know what the melting point of gold is, but it's about 900 degrees C, and I heat the gold up and at nine hundred degrees C or thereabouts it turns into liquid gold, and then I leave it to cool down again and it turns back to solid gold. Is that melting and freezing or is that something different?

P1:   It's just melting and cooling down.

T: Why is it melting then? You're happy with the word melting for something changing from a solid to a liquid at a temperature that's not zero

P1:   Because it's melting, because the temperature's hotter than it should be.. I'm… I'm confused now.

At this point I return to an authoritative explanation of freezing, with reference to the examples that have been shared.

Appendix B: Changes of State – Question Plan

Big Ideas

- Solids, liquids, gases; properties; changes of state (evaporation, condensation, melting, freezing); reversible; irreversible; dissolving;

Possible Misconceptions

- Difficulty in applying ideas to a new context, particularly if water is not involved (need to support generalisation)
- Freezing only happens at 0 ℃ or 'when it's cold'
- Confusion between melting and dissolving
- Metals (e.g. gold) and rocks do not melt (only ice?)
- Water is the only liquid

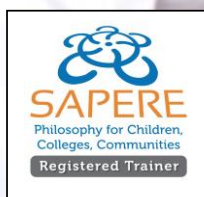## Questions to probe conceptual understanding…

- Where does the water on the washing go?
- Why does washing dry quicker on a warm day?
- How does the water get from the washing onto the window? Can you describe its journey?
- Why does water condense on the window more than in other places – the TV screen, for example?
- Are there examples of other substances that evaporate and condense?
- Why does the lava turn solid? Why doesn't it stay runny?
- Are there examples of substances that freeze at different temperatures?
- What is similar about melting and dissolving? Why are they different?
- How do you know that the egg isn't freezing? Why isn't this a change of state?
- Can you think of any other changes that can't be reversed / in which something new is made?
- How can you tell whether a change is a change of state?

Questions to make meaning…

- Where do you see condensation in your house?
- What happens to butter when you put it on your toast?
- Can you melt bread? What happens when you heat it? Is that a change of state?
- What other changes of state do you see at home?

Comprehensive support for the development of talk for learning and for living (online and face-to-face)

SAPERE — Philosophy for Children, Colleges, Communities — Registered Trainer

DIALOGUE WORKS

Oracy Cambridge — HUGHES HALL, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Neil Phillipson

Dr Neil Phillipson has twenty years of experience as a teacher, a consultant and a trainer. He is registered with SAPERE as a Level 1 and Level 2A trainer in Philosophy for Children (P4C) and is a Licensed Trainer with Dialogue Works. He has co-authored a book on Dialogic Education with Professor Rupert Wegerif of Cambridge University and is an associate of Oracy Cambridge.

Neil is able to offer training and support in:

- **Philosophy for Children**
- **Thinking Moves A-Z**
- **Thinking Together**

See Page 2 for further details

Classroom talk can play a huge role in learning, but research continually suggests that it is often used ineffectively. Through a better quality of classroom interaction:

- Students develop deeper understanding of key concepts and ideas
- Teachers and teaching assistants are better able to facilitate classroom dialogue and to use it as an invaluable AfL tool
- Students develop metacognition and become better thinkers
- Students are better equipped to engage with other perspectives in the classroom, in the wider community and online

Available CPD ranges from introductory staff meetings and inset days to three year packages of support helping schools to become centres of excellence in the use of classroom dialogue. Please contact Neil@21stcenturylearners.org.uk to discuss your needs.

T: 07512033848 Tw: @Phillipson70

WWW.21STCENTURYLEARNERS.ORG.UK

What is Philosophy for Children (P4C)?

P4C is practiced in approximately 60 countries worldwide. It engages children in communities of enquiry, which involve philosophical thinking and dialogue around questions and concepts that are important in their lives; questions of happiness, identity and truth, for example. This enriches the children's understanding of these concepts and supports them to engage in better dialogue.

Getting better at dialogue means getting better at 'thinking together', which ultimately leads to better personal thinking and greater wisdom. The skills and dispositions practised in P4C (by teachers as well as students) spread out across the curriculum, leading to a better quality of talk and accelerated progress. You can read a report on the impact of P4C at KS2 on the Education Endowment Foundation website, and you can find out more at sapere.org.uk and 21stcenturylearners.org.uk.

Available support includes taster sessions, SAPERE validated Level 1 and Level 2A training, Dialogue Works P4C+ training, and consultancy including working towards SAPERE's School Awards.

What is Thinking Moves A-Z (and how does it support metacognition)?

The A-Z is a list of 26 distinct acts of thinking. A, for example, denotes the act of thinking 'Ahead', B the act of thinking 'Back' and C the act of 'Connecting'. The A-Z is:

- **Memorable** The alphabet acts as a mnemonic making it easy to learn the names of the 26 moves
- **Comprehensible** Activities and associated language are provided to allow each move to be practised and understood
- **Comprehensive** All cognitive moves are encompassed in the A-Z. They are applicable across all areas of the curriculum and all phases from early years to secondary.

If we can recognise and name the cognitive moves we make then we can reflect on their purpose and value. We can then begin to make conscious decisions to apply them. We become better at metacognition, leading to better thinking, better learning and wiser decisions – a better way of being! You can read a report on the value of metacognition on the Education Endowment Foundation website, and you can find out more at dialogueworks.co.uk and 21stcenturylearners.org.uk.

Available support includes taster sessions, the one day (or equivalent) training course and ongoing consultancy.

What is Thinking Together?

Thinking Together is a dialogue-based approach to the development of talk to support learning within the normal school curriculum. The central idea is the use of a set of co-constructed 'ground-rules' to guide students towards talk that is 'exploratory' (defined on the University of Cambridge website as talk that emphasises reasoning, the sharing of relevant knowledge and a commitment to collaborative endeavour).

The ground-rules also support reflection on the quality of talk and of thinking and hence promote metacognition. Training includes discussion of the different talk-types used in classrooms, the situations in which exploratory talk and dialogue are purposeful, and the effective facilitation of dialogue.

You can find out more at thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk and 21stcenturylearners.org.uk.

Available support includes taster sessions, whole school training and ongoing consultancy.

The three approaches described here can be implemented individually, and they combine beautifully to give a comprehensive approach to the development of talk for learning (and for living).