

Dear Teacher, where are we going?

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This article is offered in a Socratic spirit: it hopes to raise questions, provoke thought, and springs from the healthy ignorance of its author. It does not claim to represent the views of SAPERE. Finally, it aims to:

- to raise questions about ‘raising questions’, and the purpose of education in the 21st Century
- to suggest ‘wiser education’ as a useful reflection tool
- to offer Philosophy for Children as a practical starting point for ‘wise classroom practice’.

1.) Questions, Education, & the 21st Century

If your plan is for one year, plant rice; if your plan is for ten years, plant trees; if your plan is for one hundred years, educate the children.

Confucius

For the past five years I have been training teachers, both in the UK and abroad, in the Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach to teaching and learning. A central part of that training involves holding ‘enquiries’; thoughtful dialogues centred upon a question that the group has raised and voted to focus upon. The aim of these enquiries is to develop the cognitive, social, and emotional skills with them, and their pupils. It’s a demanding, exciting, rewarding, and revealing process.

In order to raise initial questions, P4C practitioners use a stimulus of some sort; a video clip, a picture, a poem, some text, or anything else that will provoke curiosity and initial ideas. I often use the following letter as a stimulus in introductory courses. It reads:

"Dear Teacher

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:

Gas chambers built by learned engineers;
children poisoned by educated physicians;
infants killed by trained nurses; women and
babies shot by college and high-school
graduates; so I am suspicious of education.

My request is: help your students to become
human. Your efforts must never produce learned
monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated
Eichmanns.

Reading, writing and arithmetic are important
only if they serve to make our children more
human."

It's a powerful stimulus, and it raises some profound questions. [You might try using it with colleagues: Reflect quietly on the letter, share first thoughts or reactions in small groups, and then ask for each group to offer a philosophical (open / wondering) question that it would like to investigate further. List all the questions, and then get the whole group to vote for one question to focus upon. Then enquire into that chosen question; what opinions, arguments, issues arise? At the end, reflect on what the enquiry achieved.]

Previous focus questions have been:

- "Is morality taught or caught?"
- "Who is responsible for our actions?"
- "How can we become better humans?"
- "Is evil the result of a poor education?"
- "What is education for?"

The consequent enquiries are fascinating for many reasons, but two common features stand out for me in particular. First, the extraordinarily rich variety of views that teachers have about the means and ends of education. Second, the frequent comment that "we don't get a chance to explore these sorts of questions, but we should". Put another way, it's clear that educators greatly value revisiting and testing the very foundations of what we dedicate so much of our lives to; teaching and learning.

After fifty enquiries using this particular stimulus with teachers, I am left in no doubt that (a) there is a need and a desire for teachers to question the means and ends of education, and that (b) that need is not being met. Furthermore, these needs also apply to pupils. “Dear Teacher”, they should rightly ask, “what is this education for?”

Questioning the fundamentals – a luxury?

In the English education system – and many others perhaps - this lack of fundamental philosophical questioning is hardly surprising. So much of what teachers and pupils do is heavily prescribed or controlled. Consider, for example, the demands of our content laden English National Curriculum, the innumerable test and exam requirements, school league tables, internal evaluation and monitoring, government inspections, and the promotion and pay structures that are geared to support such things. What’s the point of questioning when we don’t have the freedom to change things?

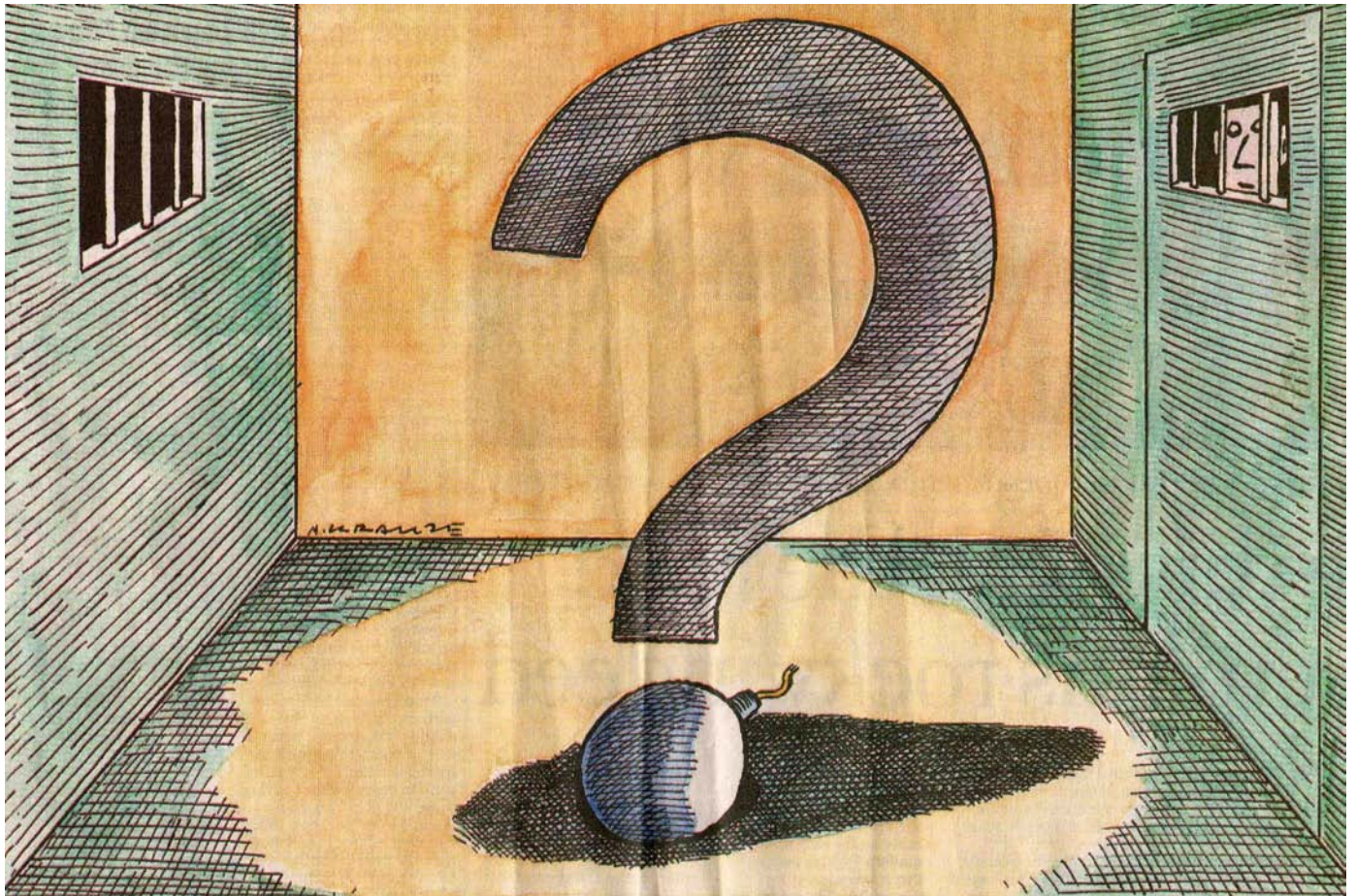
Moreover, there’s so much to cover in our overcrowded timetables that there are few opportunities to explore fundamental questions, even if we could change things. Reflecting on what we’re doing, and why, has become a luxury few can afford. “Never mind where the ship is sailing, just scrub the decks as you’re told to”.

The costs of not questioning

I believe this lack of broader reflection and enquiry comes at a severe cost. Firstly, motivation suffers terribly for both teachers and pupils. If we don’t understand - and fundamentally agree with - what and why we’re teaching or learning, then the natural desire to make education succeed is dramatically reduced. True, we can be motivated by pay, rewards, punishments, status, and a host of other carrots and sticks, but if the fundamental belief in what we’re doing is alienated from our actions, then we’ll never reach 2nd gear. And the first step towards connecting that belief with action is in the analysis – the questioning – of what we’re actually doing and effecting.

To test this out, just ask primary teachers or pupils about the Literacy Hour: do they think it’s efficient and worthwhile? Is it a choice they would make as free professionals? Do pupils learn to enjoy and improve their writing and reading as a result of it? Both anecdotally and statistically, I find very little evidence of true motivation or success with regard to this statutory requirement. Nor is it, in my view, an isolated case. Sometimes it seems exemplary.

The second cost comes as a consequence of this demotivating environment; disempowerment. When teachers and pupils are not actively engaged with the questions that underpin the methods and purposes of education, their ability to affect real change is severely depleted. In such circumstances, we hand over more and more power to ‘the experts’ and political passing winds. Since when, for example, did we agree to be told not just what to teach, but **how** to teach as well what to teach (again the Literacy Hour as a case in point)?



“If there is any way of translating Labour values into action, it is through education.”

Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Education [The Independent](#) 13/2/06.

As this quote starkly demonstrates, education – its means and goals – can be regarded as a politically directed tool. But is that tool (us!) being well used, to what ends, and what are those ‘Labour values’ exactly? Don’t we have both a moral responsibility as well as the right to **at least question** what we’re increasingly being directed to do? Furthermore, I believe such questions adopt far greater significance today than they have done for many decades. If education is a political tool, surely we should be asking this question in particular:

“Is our present education system preparing us well for the challenges of the 21st century?”

As I write, the headline of today’s (15th April 2006) Independent newspaper reads: “**Chief scientist warns bigger rise in world’s temperature will put 400 million at risk...** The world’s temperature is on course to rise by more than three degrees Centigrade despite efforts to combat global warming, Britain’s chief scientist (Sir David

King) has warned". Many scientists would argue that the 3 degree rise marks a point of no return; global warming will continue to increase beyond any hope of human control, and the effects will be catastrophic in the extreme. Even if the degree rise is arguable and uncertain, we should surely be preparing for the worst while hoping for the best.

If the enormous challenges of global warming are not enough to spur a wholesale re-evaluation of education, consider those of water and energy shortages, religious and racial conflict, the iniquitous distributions of wealth, medicines, and technology. In a world where 60% of the population is hungry, where 59% of the world's wealth is controlled by just 6% of the world's population, there are serious questions, and changes, that need to be made. Not to mention, of course, the unknown challenges of the coming century. Are we preparing the children who will witness these times to cope well with the unpredictable?

To explore this for yourselves, you might compile your own list of "challenges for the 21st Century" for a few minutes. Alternatively, try this 'Diamond Nine' exercise:

DIAMOND 9 – Education aims at, and should aim at...

Cut out the 9 boxes, and place them in order of importance, with one box at the top (most important), two on the second row, three on the third, two on the fourth row, and finally one at the bottom (least important). This Diamond 9 shape should be based on what education aims at in your present education system. Then repeat the exercise placing the boxes in the order that you think they should be in. The blank box is provided for you to add an option of your own (e.g. "Enjoy learning" or "Live in a sustainable way"). Is there a difference between the two Diamond 9s? What do you think should change, and why?

Education helps pupils to...

Be curious and questioning	Think and communicate Well	Know facts
Prepare for work and jobs		Live healthy lives
Pass exams	Live in communities	Care for others

Part 1: Summary

Enquiring into the fundamental questions about the means and ends of education is essential if we are to:

- 1) Feel engaged, motivated and purposeful about teaching and learning
- 2) Play an active and meaningful role in shaping the future of education
- 3) Address the enormous challenges of 21st Century in democratic and thoughtful ways.

Is our present education system allowing us to do these things? No, or certainly not enough. Our vision is so conditioned by the assumptions of an outdated curriculum, our action so limited by a blizzard of compulsory initiatives, and our ability to question and instigate meaningful change so neutralised, that the very idea of shaping young lives to cope with the 21st century seems fanciful at best. So, what to do?

2.) Wise education

Assuming that the direction of education in the 21st Century needs much more serious and widespread questioning and change – and it's a big and provocative statement, I'm aware – what now?

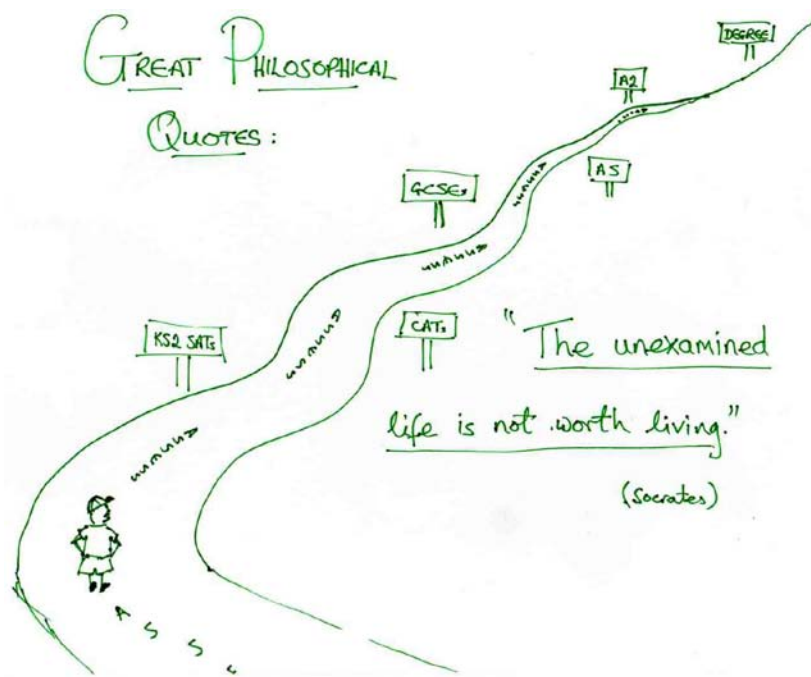
Inevitably, this is an enormous and complex question, but nonetheless essential for that. The role and co-ordination of politicians, unions, communities, education professionals, parents, and – not least - the pupils themselves, is clearly a huge issue. With tiresomely un-unified unions (what irony...self-divided and ruled over!), heavily centralised control, increasingly privatised funding of education, and overburdened professionals in all areas, the challenge is not small. Then there's the minor matter of aims, means, and co-ordination of future plans for education. Who *should* be deciding these things, and how?

Rather than attempt to tackle these huge areas here, I'd like to offer an experiment in creative thinking to help generate a few fresh perspectives and questions. Sometimes soaring above the increments and strictures of reality can allow us to glimpse more enlightened directions to pursue...

A Flight of Fancy – Wise Education.

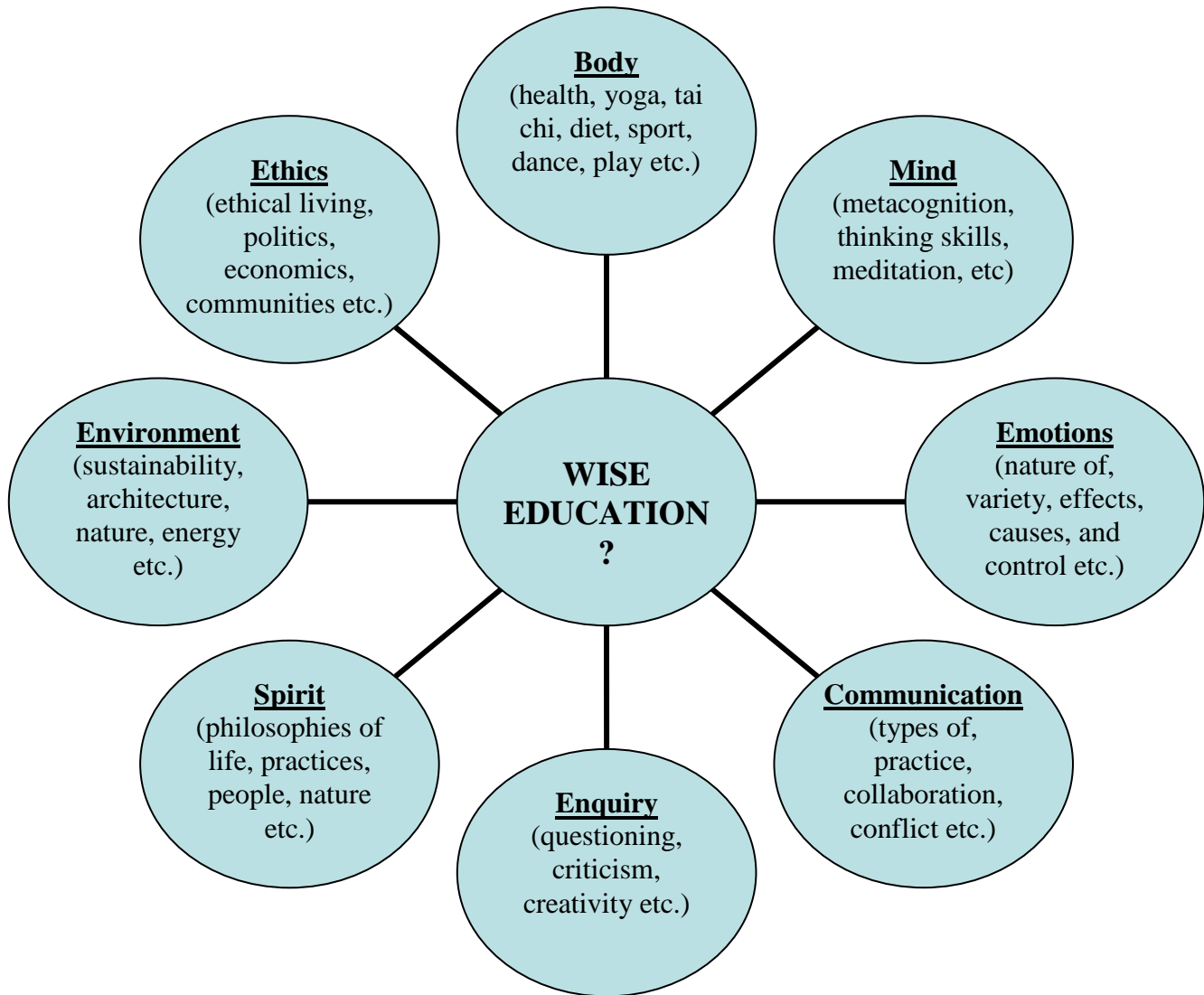
Indulge a flight of fancy for five minutes. Forget, as far as possible, the structures and aims of our present education systems. Let us freely consider 'education' from a philosophical perspective, one where 'philosophical' is returned to its original meaning of "love of wisdom" (Ancient Greek, 'phil' & 'sophos'): ***What would education look like if it was based on a fundamental concept of 'wisdom'?*** Its primary aim would not be to produce clever pupils, or feed the job market, or to get good grades, but to help children to ***become wiser***. What might 'wise education' mean? Would it be desirable, and if so, would it be possible?

For example, if becoming wiser was the core aim of education, would you still have a curriculum, and one taught by subject? Would exams exist, and if so, what and how might they test? What would you do about class size, setting, diet, physical exercise, competition, emotions, the skills of the mind or communication? Would you concentrate on skills and attitudes more than content? Indeed, would a school based on 'wise education' look anything like a school?



Free think: Spend a few minutes brainstorming what 'wise education' might mean and involve in your view. Chart a few key ideas on a scrap of paper and experiment with links between them.

Here are a few of my own ideas to help provoke thoughts:



[The eight areas above are merely starting points for discussion. They are not offered as 'subject areas', but as aspects of an organic learning process that should be developed from the questions, interests, and curiosity of both pupils and teachers. Of course, subject information will be needed (maths, science, languages, etc.) to equip children for jobs and life, but this content should not be broadly dictated. It should be 'integrated as needed' to inform and enhance the broader aim of becoming *wiser*.]

Part 2 Summary: Why 'Wise Education'?

Part 1 highlighted how the lack of questioning in education leads to the demotivation and disempowerment of both teachers and pupils. Part 2 aimed to emphasise the importance of this questioning in the context of the 21st Century and its severe challenges, and offered Wise Education as a way of refreshing our vision of what education could or should be like.

Wisdom may not be sufficient for the future prosperity of our global community, but I'd argue

that it's certainly necessary; a *sine qua non* of a good future. A first step towards this wisdom, therefore, might be to start with questioning and communicating skills; without them, we can't engage with meaningful action and change. But how can we develop those skills in the classroom?

3.) Philosophy for Children & Wisdom

The Philosophy for Children (P4C) approach to teaching and learning specialises in helping children and adults to 'become wiser'. Here 'wisdom' is not regarded as a creed to be learnt, or a specific outlook on life, but as a *process* of enquiring into meaningful questions that help us to think, feel, and act in more thoughtful ways. Wisdom, then, is not a fixed perspective handed down from on high, but a way of life; a process of reflecting and enquiring with others.

P4C aims to encourage children (or adults) to think critically, caringly, creatively and collaboratively. It helps teachers to build a 'community of enquiry' where participants create and enquire into their *own* questions, and 'learn how to learn' in the process. Reassuringly, P4C has a considerable pedigree; it has been developed over the last 30 years and is now practised in 60 countries. Its "serious fun" as one pupil put it.

P4C focuses on thinking skills and dialogue in communal settings, and contributes particularly well towards the Primary & KS3 Strategies, Literacy, Speaking & Listening, Circle Time, Thinking Skills, Emotional Literacy, Values Education, Citizenship, and PSHE, but it can be used very effectively within all curriculum subjects, with all ages, and with all abilities.

P4C is particularly useful in the Gifted and Talented context. It allows young people to ask their own questions, develop ideas through open-ended dialogue, take responsibility for the pace of learning, and extend their thinking skills in a meaningful context. Teachers and pupils throughout the UK have found this approach to G & T very effective and, most importantly, fun.

Those who work with G & T pupils know that their emotional and social well being can need particular support. These pupils can feel particularly isolated, pressured, or frustrated, for example. P4C can directly help young people address these issues in a safe learning environment, and provide support in their search for understanding, identity and friendship. Consequently, P4C is not just a thinking skills programme, but one that encourages emotional and social development as well:

Sample results from a P4C research project in Scotland: (Clackmannashire: Primary Schools 2002 / 3: 'Promoting social and cognitive development through collaborative enquiry': see www.sapere.org.uk for further information)

1. A whole population of children gained on average 6 standard points on a measure of cognitive abilities after 16 months of weekly enquiry (1hr pw).
2. Pupils and teachers perceived significant gains in communication, confidence, concentration, participation and social behaviour following 6 months of enquiry.

3. Pupils doubled their occurrence of supporting their views with reasons over a 6 month period.
4. Teachers doubled their use of open-ended questions over a six month period.
5. When pupils left primary school they did not have any further enquiry opportunities yet their improved cognitive abilities were still sustained two years into secondary school.
6. Pupils increased their level of participation in classroom discussion by half as much again following 6 months of weekly enquiry.

Questioning

The skills of questioning play a central role in the P4C approach. Here are a few practical techniques and ideas that might help teachers develop these skills with their pupils.

On average, I'd estimate that most teachers use a range of 5 or 6 'habitual' questions in the classroom on a daily basis. They might be questions such as "What do you mean by that?" or "What reasons have you got for your opinion?", for example. These are the usual questions, and they elicit a certain kind of thinking and – often – emotion in pupils.

The phrasing and variety of these questions is therefore of critical importance. Compare the following examples:

Version 1: "ABC goes to ABD. MNO goes to MN? What's the answer?"

Version 2: "ABC goes to ABD. MNO goes to MN? What *might* the answer be?"

In Version 1, the phrasing directs pupils to think that

- (a) there's only one right answer (P)
- (b) the teacher's answer is the right one, and therefore
- (c) I can fail here if I don't guess it correctly.

However, in Version 2, things are different. The introduction of the word 'might' opens up the possibilities. The pupils are freer to explore their own ideas, and so long as there's a reason behind it, any answer will do. Therefore pupils are encouraged to think that

- (a) there are many possible answers here ("it might be Q because MN? is in the second row, so it's 2 letters on from O")
- (b) I can think about my own responses and reasons, not just the teacher's, and
- (c) I can't fail if I give my reasons.

(Thanks to Prof John Geake for this example)

The point here is that the teacher's ability to question can have an enormously determining influence on the creative thinking and the confidence of the pupils. Version 2, for example, can easily elicit at least 6 different answers with 12 year olds; a much more creative, enjoyable and challenging response than just the 'right' answer of the teacher. Consequently the greater the

teacher's repertoire of questions, the greater control he or she has over thinking skills and confidence of the pupils.

Consider the list of questions below. You might:

- a) Simply pick one question you don't normally use, and try integrating it into your daily practice. What effects does it have? How is thinking or emotion altered as a result of asking it?
- b) Diagnose a weak thinking or communication skill in your class. Perhaps they love contributing ideas, but do not make themselves clearly understood? You might, therefore, favour the question in the first section (below), and use 'questions seeking clarification' more often for a few weeks. Do the pupils become more articulate as a result?
- c) Share 4 or 5 questions on a piece of card with your pupils before a dialogue, and see if they can use them during the discussion. This helps them to model and exercise the vocabulary and questioning skills amongst themselves.
- d) Add one question a week to your repertoire; within a year you will be equipped with a powerful and effective range of questions that can really open up thinking in the classroom.

Helpful Questions for the Facilitator

By asking these sorts of questions, your students will develop their own ideas more thoroughly, and will learn to challenge others with similar questions. [Skills and vocabulary follow each section]:

Questions seeking clarification:

Can you explain that...? What do you mean by...? Can you give me an example of...? How does that help...? Does anyone have a question to ask about that idea?

[Explaining, defining, giving examples, supporting, enquiring]

Questions that ask for reasons and evidence:

Why do you think that...? How do we know that...? What are your reasons for...? Do you have evidence of...? Can you justify your opinion?

[Forming an argument, assumptions, reasons, evidence]

Questions that explore alternative views:

Can you put it another way...? Is there another point of view...? What if someone suggested that...? What would someone who disagreed with you say? What is the difference between that view and...?

[Re-stating a view, speculation, distinctions, alternative views]

Questions that test implications and consequences:

What follows (what can we work out) from what you say? Does that view agree with what was said earlier? What would be the consequences of that? Is there a general rule for that? How would you test to see if that was true? [Implications, consistency, consequences, testing for truth]

Questions about the question or dialogue:

What kind of question is that? How does that help us with the question we are asking? Where have we got to with our question? Can someone summarise our progress so far? Are we any closer to answering our question? Where did we get stuck with the question? What should we change about how we explore our next enquiry?

[Questioning, analysing, connecting, summarising]

CONCLUSION:

- 1) Teachers and pupils need to question education and learning more deeply and more often to make it truly meaningful and well motivated.
- 2) The needs of the 21st Century are great because the predictable (and unpredictable?) challenges ahead are very likely to be profound and widespread.
- 3) We therefore need to challenge our present education system; is it up to the job?
- 4) Reflect on the means and aims of education in terms of wisdom, not simply cleverness / grades / targets / tests.
- 5) The 'wise education' thought experiment invites you to open this concept up and develop it for yourselves.
- 6) P4C is a very effective starting point for generating this wise education approach. It's practical, it has pedigree, and it's fun!
- 7) Take a risk... try some of the activities in this article, and make some real change!
- 8) Finally, encourage real questioning in class and staff rooms, and the wider community. Without this, better understanding, vision, and change cannot happen.

Will Ord is the former Chair of SAPERE (www.sapere.org.uk), an education trainer, and author. He has been a Head of RE, Assistant Head of Sixth Form, and a school governor. Will has worked with the DfES, QCA, Ofsted, LEAs, and many schools in the UK and abroad. He can be contacted through: www.thinkingeducation.co.uk