How to Find the Fence in P4C

You show the class a powerful image that invites a strong, heartfelt response. They come up with powerful questions, and choose one that they all feel really strongly about. So far so good.

Then it turns out they all really strongly feel the same thing.

A few minutes are spent warmly endorsing each other's thoughts. And then the discussion grinds to a halt, because nobody really disagrees with anybody. It's not very satisfying, despite the engagement and sincerity of all concerned.

You need people on each side of the fence

Disagreement is what gives enquiry energy. So in the stimuli you choose, the questions that are chosen and the facilitation of the discussion, you need to have an eye for problems that resist easy solutions and lazy consensus.

Finding the fence in the stimulus you choose

The most important thing is that there should be some tension or conflict within the stimulus. A picture of suffering immediately positions the viewer to be angry (with "them", the perpretrators), and a session of values affirmation rather than enquiry or self-examination.

Lots of stories and images already contain conflicting ideas. To get a feel for how this works as a participant in an enquiry, I'm using a deliberately adult and challenging stimulus. What questions do you have in response to these?









These pictures contain different balances of horror for Nazism, informed by our knowledge of history, with our sense that childhood is a time of innocence, and the diffusion of responsibility within groups. A picture showing adult members of the SS would be powerful but less effective as a stimulus for thinking.

In terms of culpability for the crimes of Nazi Germany, Hitler is a very easy "yes"; someone who had just been dragooned into the Hitler Youth at the age of 12 in the last years of the war is a very easy "no". The fence, and the challenging discussion, is somewhere in between, and one of these pictures might be more effective than another at promoting engagement with tough questions. It's a matter of finding the difficult cases that cause people to struggle to work out what they think.

I've picked this example in order to make the point that finding the fence does not mean encouraging the idea that there are two sides to *every* question. It is not necessary for a successful discussion to have anyone in the room who thinks the Hitler Youth was a good idea. Rather, in connection with every issue, there will be some question upon which reasonable people can disagree. Choosing a stimulus that invites such questions is one way of finding the fence.

Finding the fence through added detail

The bottom right picture is in fact from a camp in New Jersey, set up by a sympathetic organisation, the "German-American Bund". Does that extra knowledge affect the questions you would ask?

Similarly, a question presented without context may often seem to have an easy and obvious answer. But when given a context or put into a narrative, it becomes much more challenging.

Do you know the stuff around you is real?

You've probably had a dream where you've thought you've woken up from your dream, but are actually still in another dream. How do you know you're not in a dream right now, and that the stuff around you isn't just in your imagination?

Creating a fence in a one-sided stimulus

Something that has a very strong happy ending endorses one course of action or validates one point of view. The picture book, "The Richest Crocodile" in which a millionaire reptile realises money doesn't buy you happiness and finds new friends, has a very clear message. Something that depicts innocents suffering (famine, concentration camps, a news story about internet bullying) lines everyone up against the perpetrators and invites affirmation rather than enquiry.

If you're using a one-sided stimulus, you can introduce a dissenting voice. Write or voice the thoughts of another character in the story, or get the children to using hot-seating. With "The Richest Crocodile", you might give the perspective of an animal that is struggling to survive, and thinks friends are a nice luxury but you can't eat them.

What to look for in a question

Questions about substantially the same issue can invite or pre-empt disgreement according to their phrasing. Take a fairly open and shut question, "Do all people earn what they deserve?". You can improve it by:

- Using Why, How or Should – "Why do/how do/should different people deserve different amounts of money?"
- Making it more specific - "Can anyone deserve to earn 100 times as much money as someone else?"
- Making it more general – "Does everyone deserve the same?"
- Weakening its scope from "all" to "most" or "some" – "Do most people earn what they deserve?"

If a group are homing in on a question that is likely to get a unanimous yes or no, get them to test their question on other groups before they finalise it. If everyone answers the same, have them see if they can find the fence, by tweaking the question in to one where there is a more even split in the answers.

Finding the fence as you facilitate

During an enquiry, it can sometimes be necessary to re-problematise the question if a quick consensus is reached.

One way is to test the scope of the answer – Is the answer they have settled on always true? Would people from a different culture or historical time agree? Could the answer ever change in the future? If it couldn't, why is that? For example, with "Is it always wrong to steal?" they might decide that it's not wrong if you have to to survive or feed your family. But could there be circumstances where that excuse would not apply?

Another is to test the basis of the answer. An extreme tactic here is to see how they would explain the reasons for the answer to an alien who does not have the experience of being human. For example, with "What do you have to have to be happy?" they might decide that you have to have friends. There might be intelligent life somewhere that is perfectly happy with solitude. What makes humans different?

Another is through a specific example where the answer is less immediately obvious. For example, with "Do your circumstances decide who you are?" – if the consensus is "no", what about the case of someone growing up in a war zone with no access to education.

Whether it's the stimulus you choose, the guidance you give on question formulation, or the moves you make as facilitator, finding the fence invites the disagreement and challenge that will allow them to explore the concepts in which they have shown an interest to a deeper level.

© Jason Buckley 2011 www.thephilosophyman.com