

Making P4C Happen

This is a six-point guide to making P4C more “doable” and sustainable, aimed at headteachers or those tasked with developing P4C across a school but also relevant if you are an individual P4C champion trying to get a foothold for P4C. What I hope is that everyone will find one thing they can do next half term to make more P4C happen.

1. Make time

Nothing much will happen with P4C unless it has a time slot in the week. By all means, “double up” and use stimuli or questions drawn from topic work; or have English take the lead one half term and RE the next. But unless every child in participating classes gets a substantial P4C session every week, it will only reach a shadow of its potential.

If you can’t make that commitment as a school, don’t set yourselves up to fail at P4C. Instead, use a thinking skills programme or set of techniques that offers an “easy win” but is still worthwhile. You could use one of the various thinking toolkits on the market. Or my “Thinkers’ Games” available in our shop.

2. Give permission

Giving teachers the go-ahead to spend time on P4C isn’t enough to take the brakes off and let teachers experiment. A common concern is that the children might “go off at a tangent, and not cover what we need to”. But that’s the point. The chance for children to take the conversation in a direction that they find interesting is the beginning of independent intellectual interest. Otherwise, you are not running a community of enquiry, you are just having a normal lesson but sitting in a circle and sharing the speaking.

Let teachers know that they don’t have to have a content-based learning objective, and that as long as the children are being challenged, whatever goes on in that hour is OK. One of the important features of P4C is that it is real, responsive, unpredictable dialogue, not pseudodialogue in which the children are speaking so that their skills can be assessed, or their knowledge evidenced. One final point on this – let people know it won’t work every time, and that’s OK. If it never fails, it’s too safe and teacher-led.

3. Hear, do and see

P4C training courses are better than most at giving chances to *do*, as participants in enquiry, as well as to hear about the theory of P4C. The third ingredient, of seeing P4C in action, is often missing. If teachers can see a trainer or other experienced practitioner working with their own class, it demystifies the process and gives them the confidence to get stuck in.

Most trainers will do follow-up work with children at lower rates than INSET. After half term, I will be sending out details of a training + workshop + ongoing support package that I can offer to a limited number of schools prepared to commit to a timetabled P4C slot.

4. Make space

“Working walls” that show thinking in progress in all its messiness add more to learning than walls of “best” work. Rather than having displays, have “plays” – thought-provoking stimuli and opportunities to interact with them, by voting, commenting, responding.

I’d like to see more classrooms looking like the shed festooned with mad notes in “A Beautiful Mind”. There are lots of ways to do it. Walking round Ruth Fitze’s classroom at Bounds Green school is like being inside the mind of the class (if I could be reincarnated as a ten-year old, I’d want to be in her class). Iona Duke uses a “Wonderwall” where children can add thoughts after an enquiry.

Make space in the staff room too, for a stimulus swapping table where teachers can leave the resources they have been using, perhaps with the questions the children asked appended to them on post-it notes.

5. Make conversations

People often recognise P4C as being important. But little urgent things tend to squeeze out big important things. (I had to switch off the web for a few to write this, rather than reply to e-mails). So set up conversations that mean philosophical questions will keep coming to people’s attention again and again.

Pupil to pupil

Find a question about which two pupils disagree. Have one write his arguments and then give it to the other for a response, and so on and so on. You can use a spellings-size “Argubook” which gets passed backwards and forwards between the pupils, or an “Arguwall” where each argument builds up from a question in post-it notes of alternating colours.

Parent to child

Family dialogue within homework rather than about whether or not you've done it is much more positive. Ask parents to come up with their own questions, too.

Class to class

Set up a weekly question exchange between "buddy" classes in different year groups. Class 1 create a question and send it in a red envelope carried by a "philosophy ambassador" to Class 2. The next day or the day after, the envelope is returned with an answer or answers and a new question.

School to school

Your local authority adviser may have some information about which schools are already doing P4C. I can also do my best to hook you up with other people in your area. You might be able to get some face-to-face meetings sorted out, twin some classes, and perhaps even arrange some workshops and training. In any event, you will know you're not alone!

6. Make it easy

Teaching is an absurdly busy job at the best of times. Keeping the show on the road takes most of anyone's energy. You can, though use that to your advantage by making it easier to plan a P4C enquiry than to plan a normal lesson. (Actually facilitating an enquiry is always demanding, but the enjoyment of it compensates for the fact that you have to be on the top of your game to really listen, connect and guide the enquiry well).

Provide resources (things like my Pocket P4C, Sara Stanley's "[But Why](#)", a box of suitable stimuli, perhaps with suggested year groups, access to www.P4C.com). If you have a lesson plan pro forma that people are expected to fill in, have a different and simpler one for P4C sessions.

Consider using an assembly slot as an opportunity to present a stimulus from which each class can then generate their own questions and start an enquiry. That makes doing philosophy part of the shared experience of being at the school, and is more likely to conversations between teachers about the questions that their children chosen how the subsequent enquiries went.

Good luck!

I hope you have found some of these ideas useful. The key thing is finding some threads to sew P4C into the fabric of your school, so that it isn't just an occasional treat but something that children will remember as a treasured part of their school experience. One class I've heard of have opted for P4C over "golden time".

It requires persistence, imagination, risk-taking and collaboration between teachers with the full support of senior leadership. You have to be prepared to say "This is important, so something else will have to make way." But it's immensely rewarding, both for the children and for teachers who get to see the best in their children and connect with the values that brought them into the classroom in the first place. Do get in touch by ringing us on 01245 830123 or emailing at tom@thephilosophyman.com