

Planting Cats

Advice and support
to make P4C happen

Which is easier to look after – a cat or a pot plant?

Most people would say a pot plant. Cats are expensive and demanding.

But while everyone knows someone who's let a pot plant wither through neglect, very few of us have starved a cat.

Ethical issues aside, this is partly precisely because cats ARE more expensive and demanding. We give them names. They insist on being fed every single day. And the neighbours know that you have a cat. If you stop feeding it they will gossip.

This analogy holds for anything you want to get done, but in particular for schools taking on an initiative such as philosophy for children.

Schools often think that by "taking it slowly", "infusion", "starting small", or a few "thunks" in registration, they will plant a seed of independent thinking that will continue to grow.

What usually happens is that, because it's half-hearted, other priorities squeeze it out and it becomes another dimly remembered thing that never quite took off.

If you want something to succeed, plant a cat. One that has a name, that expects regular feeding, and that the neighbours expect you to look after.

This document has ideas on how to "plant a cat" for philosophy. There are some things you can do yourself, there are some things I can help you do for free, and there are packages of training and support to suit different budgets.

Giving it a name

Make sure children start with a working idea of what philosophy is. Give them language, rituals and expectations that set philosophy apart from other activities, giving it an identity and making the word meaningful for them. It's not "circle time".

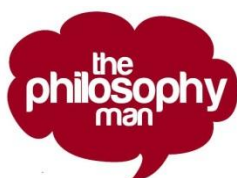
You can ask if anyone knows a Sophie or Sophia, and explain that the name is Ancient Greek, over 2,000 years old - you can reference the Olympics for context – and it means "wisdom".

The "philos" bit comes from one of the Greek words for "love". So philosophy means "love of wisdom". Philosophers try to get wiser by asking questions – quarrelsome, juicy questions that people still disagree about even when they've thought very hard about them.

You can use mastering the word as a warm-up, splitting it into syllables and going round the circle faster and faster one syllable at a time in a communal tongue-twister. It's good for listening and awareness of others in the circle.

To begin with, it will be the "outward and visible signs" that you're doing philosophy that define it for them – sitting in a particular way, splitting into groups to come up with questions, voting and then "passing it on". So keep some continuity in the way you do things, and don't feel you have to chop and change all the time.

Over time, "philosophy" will acquire a richer meaning for them in terms of the kind of thinking they're doing, and the shared history of the questions they have thought about.



If your class write to me telling me...

- **what philosophy means to them**
- **what makes philosophy different**
- **their favourite question so far, why, and what they thought**

...I will write back with some thoughts on their question, and a new question I think they will find interesting. The correspondence will be published online.

Regular feeding

If you do P4C once a fortnight, and miss a session, that's a month gone and all continuity lost. Find a way of spending an hour each week on it (shorter for younger children).

I have seen teachers and headteachers looking very uncomfortable when I have said this during training. There's a panic of "how can we fit it in".

There are two ways to do this. One is to carve out a regular slot for P4C, and then identify suitable concepts and questions for enquiry in the topics or texts already on your agenda. **Put what you are doing into P4C, don't rely on putting P4C into what you are doing.**

You can visit www.thephilosophyman.com/topics to see how.

The second is to recognise that P4C is so precious both for itself and for the skills it develops, that it should have its own slot in which to develop and follow the emerging interests of the group.

One of the obstacles to that can be a shortage of ideas of what to do next. That might seem odd, given the enormous range of things that can be used to start a P4C enquiry. But it's that very lack of constraint that can lead to paralysis – "If I can use *anything*, where do I start?"

The stories I send out can help with this to a degree, but inevitably there won't be something that tickles your fancy if every issue. P4C.com has lots of other resources, Robert Fisher's "Stories for Thinking" series is good, and there are lists of picture books for P4C on the web.

It's very helpful to provide a place where staff can share practice - something as simple as a box in the staffroom where people can leave stimuli they have used, perhaps with a board for the questions they have asked.

Tell the neighbours

Nothing holds us to our best intentions so well as making them public.

At a whole school level, if you can have a shared time when everybody in your school is doing P4C. Wednesday mornings before morning break is a good time, with philosophy cakes served in the staffroom. That way, there will be a talking point for staff about what stimuli were used, what questions chosen.

Have a shared space as well – a question wall in a corridor for the questions each class have been investigating. On a rota, a child in each class chooses a question from the wall. He announces it before the register is taken so that everyone can think about it during that desert of wasted time. Then he begins a short discussion by saying why the question interested him. This is a great opportunity to get children doing some of the facilitating.

If staff have had limited training and lack confidence, use an assembly with an imposed question at the end to get things going, with teachers and classes assuming greater independence as they get used to enquiries. All these things can help to make philosophy part of the shared culture of the school.

Lots of schools take advantage of opportunities for “writing for other audiences” – letters to MPs, the headteacher, parents etc. because it lends a seriousness and purpose to the task. “Thinking for other audiences” is just as powerful. Twin with another class in your school or...



Email me with your name, school and the class or classes that want to be twinned. I will twin you with another school and send you both the same question to get you started. Each class then sends the other their answer and a new question, and so it continues.