



# Nurturing creative thinking from an early age

Spontaneous, creative thinking comes naturally to very young children – it's as they grow older that they become more inhibited. In the second of a two-part series, Marcelo Staricoff explains how to capture that early creativity and embed a lifelong love of thinking and learning.

In **the first article in this series**, I described how, at Hertford Infant and Nursery School in Brighton, we have worked towards developing a 'Joy of Not Knowing' (JONK) approach to teaching and learning, which is based on shared values and lifelong learning attributes to encourage children to develop a love of learning and a high level of self-esteem.

We have found that the JONK approach is particularly efficient at removing any worry associated with feelings of 'not knowing it' or 'not being able to do it'. Enjoying not knowing, however, has to be taught, and teaching the whole curriculum through the JONK approach requires specific time to be set aside.

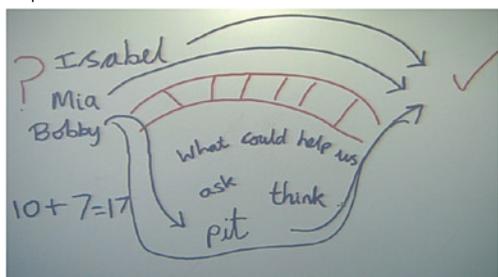
We now devote the first week of every academic year to what we call a 'Learning to Learn Week', during which we equip the children with all the tools and strategies that will enable them to access their learning throughout the year and make them feel successful as individuals and as learners. See the box 'Our Learning to Learn Week' for an overview of how we structure the week.

## Into the Pit!

An excellent way of launching a Learning to Learn Week is to begin by sharing with the children 'The Pit Model of Learning' (@James Nottingham), which demonstrates very clearly that learning involves 'not knowing' first. The model encourages children to view the concept of not knowing as something positive, rather than something to be feared or be worried about.



The premise of the 'The Pit' is that learning always starts with a question – with something we want to find out about, with a problem that we need to solve or a task that we have been asked to try and do. This is referred to as 'Q' or '?' as shown in the diagram below. It is very interesting to take children through this model by creating a huge 'Pit' on the floor or in the playground so that the children can sit and walk around it and experience it as it is being explained.



The children are then asked a question they definitely know the answer to. For example, we might ask them, what is one plus one? When they say the answer is two, they feel good about knowing the answer and they are allowed to jump across the pit to the tick or 'A' (Answer) on the other side.

The children are then asked something much more complicated, something that they are not able to immediately 'know' – this is where they are encouraged to go into the Pit. Once in the Pit, they are then encouraged to use the values and the lifelong learning skills to ask the right questions, to use specific tools and thinking

## Our Learning to Learn Week

The Learning to Learn Week presents us with a wonderful opportunity to share with the children the initiatives that accompany the JONK approach. The plan below shows how a Learning to Learn Week can be structured, where each day focuses on a different aspect of learning.

1. The Joy of Not Knowing
  - a. Learning models
  - b. Personal learning models
  - c. Whole-school Models
  - d. Should I know everything?
2. Start them thinking and keep them thinking
  - a. Thinking skills starters
  - b. Thinking blackboard
  - c. Home learning
  - d. Image of the Week
  - e. Poem of the Week
  - f. Blogging
3. Making thinking visible
  - a. Mind mapping
  - b. Concept lines
  - c. Fortune lines
  - d. Traffic lights
  - e. De Bono's Hats and PMI's
4. Philosophical enquiry
  - a. A philosophical approach to the curriculum
  - b. Philosophy at home and at school (Why? Books)
  - c. Open-ended challenge (Investigations)
5. Becoming a Lifelong Learner
  - a. Lifelong Learning dimensions
  - b. Lifelong Learning partners
  - c. The dimensions solve all problems
  - d. The dimensions linked to animals and to values

We end the week by sharing with the children the stories we've written to explain how each of the animals became particularly adept at one learning characteristic, and to place the whole JONK approach and school infrastructure in perspective. For more information on the ways we use the animals and the lifelong learning dimensions, please see the first article in this two-part series, **The joy of not knowing**.

strategies, to work alongside others, to research and to persevere in order to try to work out the answer or solve the problem. Once they have worked out the answer, they are able to climb out of the pit and experience success.

The key to this model is to then ask the children: 'When we asked you what one plus one is and you knew the answer and jumped across the pit, did you learn anything?' When they say 'no', it immediately makes them realise that in order to learn something, they must not know it first and the Pit then becomes a place where they can feel confident about any problem they are faced with. The Pit is an excellent model for taking away all the worry of 'not knowing' or of thinking that learning is 'too difficult'.

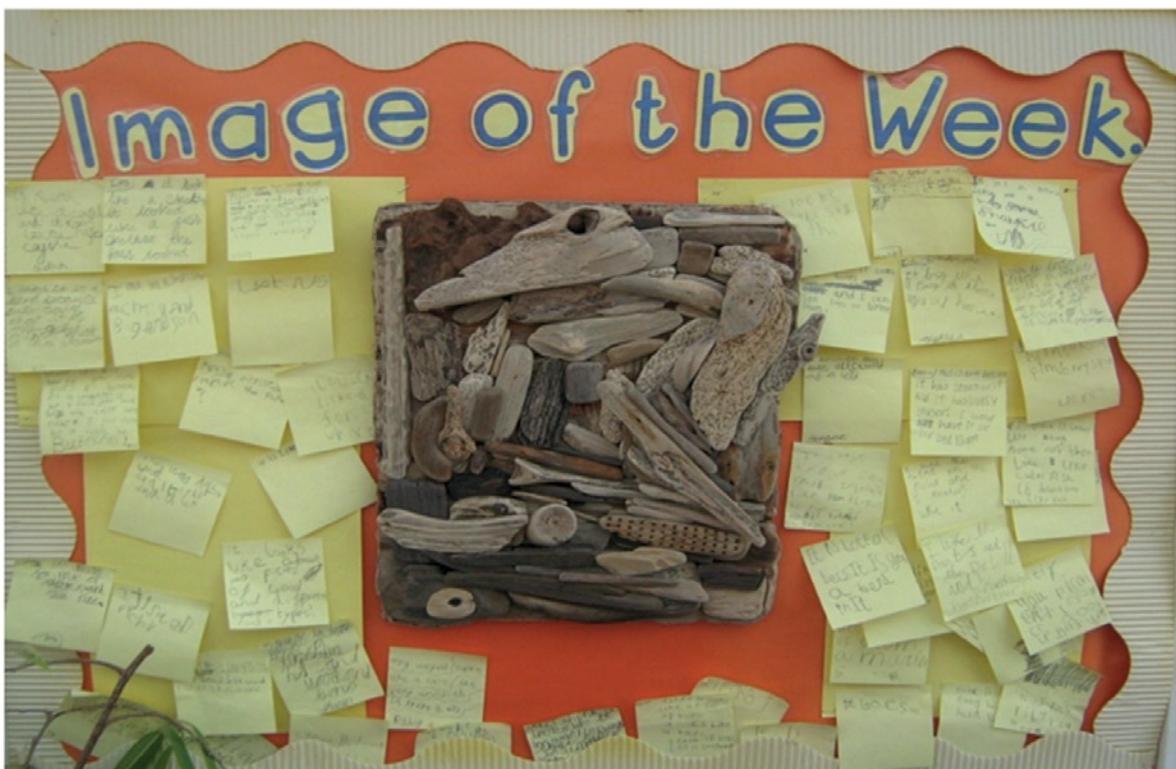
Once the concept of the Pit has been established, it is then very useful to encourage the children to derive their own 'models of learning'. A great way of introducing this as a whole-school initiative is to encourage the adults to create their own ones too.

### Making thinking enjoyable

We also introduce the children to a number of initiatives that promote a love of creative thinking.

The Thinking Skills Starters greet the children every morning, in the form of open-ended, non-topic-based challenges designed to inspire thinking by being fun, challenging, appealing and accessible to all<sup>1</sup>. I never cease to be amazed by the inspirational contributions and moments of originality that arise from these ten-minute sessions.

Starters provide a fantastic opportunity to nurture children's creative thinking, develop their self-esteem, encourage connections to be made between school and the outside world and most importantly, it gives children the freedom to pursue areas of particular interest in a way that is not regarded by them as having the usual classroom constraints or pressures. The open-ended nature of the tasks often means that the children continue pursuing the starters in their own time and often share them with their families at home. Children are also encouraged to think of their own starters to use with the whole class.



The children either have dedicated Thinking Skills books in which to tackle the starters or they may prefer to contribute to one starter all together using a big piece of paper. In an attempt to free the children from any worries and to encourage them to have a go and experiment with their thinking, it is important to share with children that these books or pieces of paper will not be marked. 'Right' or 'wrong' then become less of an issue and the children feel free to be creative with what they record and selective with what they subsequently choose to share.

It is very powerful to link starter themes to curriculum areas and to the learning objectives of the day, as the outcomes of children's thinking can then be used as starting points or as discussion points in subsequent lessons. Starters can really transform the enthusiasm with which the children enter the classroom and approach each day.<sup>2</sup>

A similar principle has also led us to introduce the concept of the 'Image or Poem of the Week'. Each week at whole school assembly, children are introduced to a work of art, which could be anything at all – a photograph, a painting, a sculpture, a poem, a drawing. This image then becomes a stimulus for critical thinking for the whole school for that week. Initial discussions in assembly are followed up in the classroom and at home too, as we place it on our website as well.

A whole school display is then set up for the children to add their thoughts using post-it notes or sticky labels. This initiative can be immensely powerful if one uses a work of art that has been produced by a child or a parent – in terms of self-esteem, this opportunity can be quite transformational!



### Developing the home-school relationship

We also try to keep the children thinking outside the school timetable by taking a thinking skills approach, similar to the starters, towards home learning. By setting them a range of interesting open-ended tasks, the children begin to perceive home learning as an interesting adventure. We give them mini projects to engage in – for example, a mind map of themselves, an odd-one-out grid, a philosophical discussion, a poster advertising their favourite film, an autobiography of a person from the Victorian times, a survey of why people read fiction, a collection of as many different types of maps as possible, designing a card for Chinese New Year and so on.

The home learning books have become very precious to the children and the dedication shown in them is always admirable. Children with particular gifts, talents or interests have amazed us time and time again by producing thinking and material of unimaginable originality and quality of presentation – often way beyond the highest expectations that we may have had for that child. It has become very popular for the children to use the home learning tasks to invent their own 'games' based on particular topics. These games are not only extremely professional but have also become the games the other children want to play in their free time.

In order to foster our strong parent-student-school triangular relationship, we have also introduced a 'Thinking Skills Blackboard' in the playground<sup>3</sup>. This enables children to enjoy thinking and learning with each other and with their families in an interesting, enjoyable and open-ended way.



The unrestricted nature of the questions posed on the blackboard enable all to draw upon interests and experiences from their personal lives, which children may not always be able to do as part of the curriculum. It brings home life into school and as a result, makes children feel special in school and about school.

An important attribute of the blackboard is the way in which it gets family members, many of whom did not have good experiences of education, engaged with their own children's learning and with the school. The question 'What is your favourite toy?' provided a very powerful example of the blackboard's ability to promote a love of learning amongst all generations, as grandparents were all drawing their own favourite toys and dolls from their own childhoods.

Some of the adults are engaging in learning with their children through the blackboard in a way that they may not necessarily do at home. We are presenting children and adults with things that they haven't really thought about before. They are definitely learning together. The blackboards have been a great way to foster and drive the home-school-student triangular relationship that is so crucial for all.

Blogging can also promote the creative link between school and home. Blogs

can be very easily set up for each class and used to record the learning that has taken place during the day. At home, children and their families are then able to share in the content of the blogs and to contribute to them.

Blogs also very quickly become windows to the world, enabling an international audience to communicate and contribute and share ideas with each school. As schools have children represented in school councils, it is fascinating to also develop children with the skills and abilities of 'digital leaders', particularly as we work towards equipping our children with the skills that will enable them to be successful contributors to society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

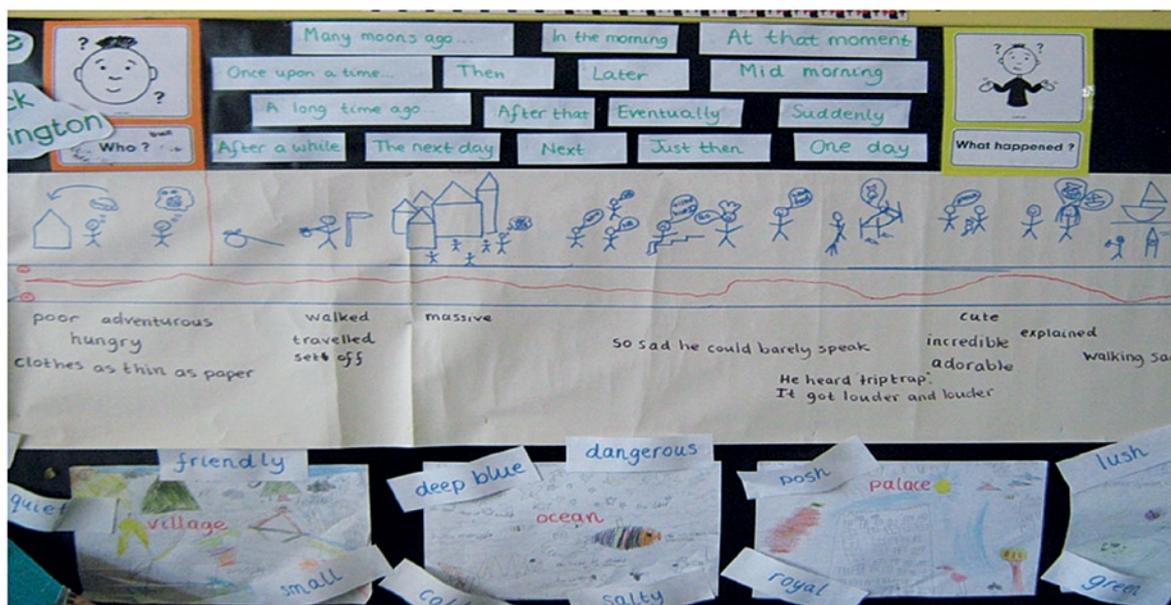


## Visual thinking

Mind mapping is a great way of enabling children to organise and structure their thinking about a topic, a person, a place, or a concept in a visual way, which invariably leads them to make connections that they wouldn't have otherwise made.<sup>4</sup> The hierarchical nature of the branches of the mind maps also enable children to rank and question their connections – it is an ideal tool for note-taking, story planning and character sketches.

Concept Lines enable children to feel particularly free to experiment with their thinking.<sup>5</sup> Concept lines are straight lines, representing a continuum, with opposite attributes at either end. They are excellent vehicles for taking away the worry of being right or wrong and for allowing personal opinions and feelings to be expressed – as long as the child is able to justify why they have placed their character, thought, feeling or opinion in a particular place on the line, this becomes their individual perception and as such, cannot be judged or perceived to be wrong. It is fascinating to analyse characters from a text in this way – for example, by posing philosophical questions as to the relative intelligence of each of the characters in say, Little Red Riding Hood.

Fortune Lines compliment concept lines by enabling children to analyse text by mapping the fortune of each character in a story as the plot progresses. Every time the line changes direction, the student is prompted to briefly describe what has happened to change that character's fortune. This is a great way of visualising a story as a graph and can also encourage children to plan and predict how a story may develop by merely thinking about how the character lines could continue along the time axis.



## PMI's and Thinking Hats

Another excellent way of structuring and promoting thinking is through the use of PMI's.<sup>6</sup> This involves giving the children one minute at a time to think solely on what is either positive (P) about something or someone, negative (M for Minus) or interesting (I – neither good nor bad, but worthy of note). PMI's represent an excellent springboard for discussion, allowing the children to share their ideas, and for the teacher to build a list of whole class contributions.

The originality of thought that arises from these is very striking. Performing a PMI on philosophy for example, showed that children view philosophy as a unique motivator, enabling them to feel a real sense of achievement and a love of learning.

The use of De Bono's Six Thinking Hats is also an extremely useful tool to

use with children to promote creative, spontaneous thinking and an awareness of what others may be feeling or thinking. Wearing different coloured hats encourages children to approach a problem from different conceptual angles. For example, the red hat demands an emotional response, whereas the yellow hat requires a very positive approach. It is fascinating to place children in a moral dilemma and see how they respond to the circumstances, changing the hat they are wearing as they are thinking through the problem. For example, we could ask the children to imagine that they are at a restaurant and the meal is taking much too long to arrive – how would they react?

### **Traffic lights**

Communicating with each other in class is a major component of learning and takes pride of place in the JONK model. Introducing the children to the concept of ‘traffic lights’ encourages children to learn to think independently and all participate together, rather than relying on hands-up approach.

Each student has a set of three cards – one red, one yellow and one green, and they use these to answer teacher-led questions, where red, yellow and green could represent anything at all, from feelings to opinions to specific scenarios. For example, red can be solids, yellow liquids and green gases, the questions can then follow – what is steam? Is electricity any of these? and so on.

Another use of ‘traffic lights’ is during normal lesson time when children use the cards to communicate with adults in the class – placing a red card on their book to alert the teacher to a problem with their learning, yellow if they feel a peer on their table is able to help and green if they are ready for the enrichment task.

### **A philosophical approach**

I believe that children are born philosophical – their pre-school years are bathed in wonder and they naturally take an inquisitive approach to the world around them. If one adopts a philosophical approach to the curriculum, this inquisitiveness can remain at the forefront of all learning throughout a student’s time in education.

A philosophical approach to the curriculum encompasses a number of initiatives that transform the classroom into an environment rich in dialogue, discussion, questioning and enquiry, where all children are able to flourish. One former student, now aged nine, said: ‘Philosophy is great because you can’t be wrong – I enjoy bouncing ideas off others and have become a critical thinker.’ Another, now ten, added: ‘I really like philosophy because we can discuss current issues in the world’.

The benefits of embarking upon a philosophical approach to the curriculum are truly multidimensional, ranging from areas as widespread as the raising of self-esteem, the development of oracy and writing skills, the promotion of values in the classroom, the contribution to a rise in standards, the development of strong and vibrant home-school communication partnerships and as a means of inspiring all children.

Introducing philosophical enquiry to a new group of children can be accomplished by sharing with them that philosophy means a ‘love of learning’ and in practice it is the ‘wonder’ that ensues when thinking about either:

- a) Questions that do not have definitive answers – big questions!
  - How far does space go?
  - How did the world begin?
  - Does time exist?
  
- b) Questions that have more than one answer – moral decisions
  - Is it ever alright to do something wrong?
  - How should we react if someone gives us a present we do not like?
  - What should happen to someone who steals a car?

Philosophical enquiry invites children to regard the process as one in which they cannot be wrong. The learning environment has to be set up as a 'community of enquiry' and ensure that all opinions are equally valued and respected. Barriers to learning that often build up when faced with traditional schoolwork tend to disappear in philosophy, and the children's body language instead turns into one of participation, engagement, and enthusiasm.

Philosophy sessions generate a very unique classroom atmosphere and produce an immense range of thought, reasoning and original ways of looking at the world around us. Children are often placed in positions that require moral judgements to be made, problems to be solved and consequences to be considered in hypothetical situations of which they may have no prior experience. The repercussions of these lessons are incredibly widespread, often spilling over into break, lunch and most importantly, their homes. Philosophy provides children with something original which they can introduce to their home environment, making them feel very special. Parents often enjoy sharing in the playground the outcomes of philosophical discussions they have had with their children the night before!

Our Reception children had the idea of starting their own philosophy books – they call them 'Why? Books' and they use them to write down all their philosophical questions! This has had a tremendous impact on the way they view school and we have been amazed at how much writing has ensued!

### Today I learnt...

As well as distinct lessons, it is also fascinating to develop a philosophical approach to the whole day and to all aspects of the curriculum. For example, generating the learning objective as a question (LQ) in conjunction with the children (rather than providing them with an already prepared statement):

- What is time? – as the precursor to learning to tell the time.
- Do shadows exist? – as a precursor to learning about light.

These questions invariably lead to purposeful discussion and dialogue even before the main body of the lesson is presented, giving children the feeling that they have a say in driving and personalising the teaching and learning process, and the teacher the opportunity to explore unexpected but relevant avenues.

The success criteria for the learning question can then be discussed as part of the children trying to answer the question. At the end of the lesson, the children add a 'Today I Learnt' (TIL) comment in their books or in dedicated feedback books, which gives them the opportunity to reflect upon their learning, make connections in their learning and discuss any difficulties they may have felt with teacher.

TILs can often become very philosophical too:

- Today I learnt to tell the time, but I am not sure it exists.
- Today I learnt the names and properties of 2D shapes, but I don't think they exist.

Enrichment is a key component of all lessons and this can take the form of an open-ended task designed to motivate the children by applying the LQ of the lesson in a different context.

- How do you think the person in the Victorian photograph is feeling?
- What would happen if *our* noses grew like Pinocchio's whenever we told a lie?

Children can also be offered the opportunity to act as 'teachers' – being able to explain a concept to a friend is a very powerful means of ensuring that the

'teacher' him/herself has grasped a particular concept. Acting as teacher has helped enormously with the way children are viewed by their peers.

Philosophy enables practitioners to get to know the children as they really are and it is enormously helpful in being able to build that special relationship with the children, as, in these sessions, the teacher is seen as an equal partner in learning rather than as a figure of authority.

### The JONK model needs everyone on board

The JONK approach does not solely rely on creating an exciting learning atmosphere throughout the school – it is also hugely dependent upon the school having a strong culture of coaching and collaboration.

In order to achieve this, we have set up three different types of 'multi-professional teams', focusing on:

1. driving forward the school development plan
2. professional enquiry action research
3. coordination of the curriculum areas.

So as not to work in isolation and to be able to share good practice and be inspired by others, we have also become part of some very exciting partnerships with other schools and with the University of Brighton.

In all we do, we try to keep a very strong triangular relationship between the child, their family and the school, to ensure that we always move forward as a whole community, benefiting from the strengths, ideas and expertise of all within it.

The wonderful thing about the JONK approach is that it has no right way – which fittingly mirrors the message it sends out to the children! Every school and every individual will adapt it to what works best for them and to what they really find fascinating. The ideas presented in these two articles tell our story and I hope they act as prompts for discussion in your school. I would love to hear about all your ideas which I am sure would enrich our provision even more.

Now in our fourth year of working towards this whole school JONK approach, we are delighted that, not only is it having an impact on standards and on narrowing the achievement gap, but it's also proving to be very gratifying professionally for us all. We feel that if we are able to encourage a positive attitude to learning in children from such an early age, then we are contributing very positively towards children's life chances and their futures.

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#### Knowledge trails

**1) Strategies for thinking** – Paul Fleming shares some strategies to help develop students' higher-level thinking skills. [library.teachingtimes.com/articles/strategiesforthinking.htm](http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/strategiesforthinking.htm)

**2) Concept lines** – Karin Murriss gives advice about how to discuss abstract concepts with children. [library.teachingtimes.com/articles/conceptlines-ttc6](http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/conceptlines-ttc6)

#### References

1. Staricoff, M. and Rees, A. (2004) The Fours Four Challenge. *Teaching Thinking*, 15, 10-14.
2. Staricoff, M. and Rees, A. (2003) Start The Day on a Thought. *Teaching Thinking*, 12, 40-44.
3. Staricoff, M. (2009) Thinking in Playgrounds, Leadership Focus, NAHT
4. Buzzan, T (2002) How to Mind Map, Thorsons, London, UK
5. Murriss, K. and Haynes, J. (2000) Storywise: Thinking Through Stories, DialogueWorks, Newport, UK.
6. de Bono, Edward (1985). Six Thinking Hats: An Essential Approach to Business Management. Little, Brown, & Company. ISBN 0-316-17791-1 (hardback) and 0316178314 (paperback).