



by Jane Yates

**‘Philosophy’ comes from the Greek word philosophia and literally means “love of wisdom.”**

**J**ohn Dewey is arguably the philosophical champion of experiential learning, a theory which has greatly influenced the development of Outdoor Education. This underpinning theory directs curriculum and teaching to take into account students individual differences.

John Dewey (1859-1952)

*"An education that emphasises community, communication, intelligent enquiry, and a reconstructive attitude can best serve the citizens of an ever-changing world."*

(Blackwell Guide to Philosophy)

There is also a strong link between Philosophy for Children and Dewey, who was the predecessor of Professor Matthew Lipman at Columbia University. It was here that Lipman originally conceived the idea of Philosophy for Children in the 1970s.

*Many adults have ceased to wonder, because they feel that there is no time for wondering, or because they have come to the conclusion that it is simply unprofitable and unproductive to engage in reflection about things that cannot be changed anyhow ... The result is that such adults, having ceased to question and to reach for the meanings of their experience, eventually become examples of passive acceptance that children take to be models for their own conduct.*

Philosophy in the Classroom

-Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980

Philosophy for Children, or P4C as it is more commonly known, is a thinking skills programme which was developed by Lipman with his associates at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children(IAPC) at Montclair State University. It has an ultimate aim of making students

more reasonable. Like the Ancient Greek philosophers, Lipman advocated that the ultimate goal of education should be to develop 'practical wisdom' or 'good judgement'.

Philosophy for Children is not about engaging children with the views of philosophers or teaching university-style philosophy. It is about creating a safe and stimulating environment where children can generate their **own philosophy** based on their responses to a given stimulus. It is not a one-off session, but the aim is that the group becomes **used** to thinking together. In this way, mutual respect and confidence are built up over time.

Research in P4C provides evidence that it not only increases thinking and listening skills, but also skills of communication, self-esteem, confidence, behaviour and engagement with learning across subject areas.

Traditionally, P4C has been classroom based in most of the 60 countries it is now practiced, but it is increasingly used to make sense of and deepen Outdoor Learning experiences. It can be used as a review technique for group development, or for thinking and understanding about relevant concepts within environmental, adventure and outdoor contexts. In the broader context of Outdoor Learning, it has the capacity to cut across areas such as spirituality. There is also scope for P4C being part of residential experiences or regular outdoor programmes such as Forest Schools.

A typical session includes a stimulus such as a story, photo, artefact or an outdoor learning activity. Participants generate philosophical questions and one is chosen as the main focus of enquiry by the group. The enquiry is guided by a facilitator, whose role is crucial in encouraging dialogue that is collaborative, caring, critical and creative.



**P4C**

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At the IOL conference in October 2010, I ran a workshop where participants were introduced to the P4C methodology. In order to experience the methodology participants were asked to generate philosophical questions in response to a short story called Raven Rock. This is a story about a boy who is asked by his teacher to recall a place that is special to him and in doing so recaptures a previous experience of climbing a rock wall that had pushed him to his physical and emotional limits. Not forgetting the constant voice of his mother in his head reminding him to be careful...

Philosophical questions are the big questions in life, those which allow us to explore concepts that are important to us all. They might not have a 'right' answer, but they may have several answers. They are questions that need further enquiry and can draw on our own experiences, opinions and examples. Although the aim is not to obtain shared agreement, there is certainly the opportunity for shared understanding.





Participants were asked to make connections between questions before using a voting technique to obtain one question for further enquiry (everyone was given three stickers to place on questions).

**The following show a loose grouping of questions:**

*Questions* Questions relating to the concept of specialness of (place, people, objects)  
*How do places, people and things become 'special' to us?*  
*What is special?*  
*Can empathy limit our horizons?*  
*Would it be the same if he went back and did it again?*  
*Would revealing why it is special destroy it's specialness?*

*Questions* Questions relating to concepts of sharing (experiences, feelings, review)  
*Why should we share our feelings?*  
*Should some things not be shared?*  
*How do we get around judgemental traps?*  
*Do we damage the magic of adventure by intellectualisation and analysis of the event?*  
*Why can't Alex talk about Raven Rock?*  
*Whose expectations are most important?*  
*We feel we need to question Alex further – why is this, is it important?*

*Questions* Questions relating to concepts about the experience (adventure, danger, freedom)  
*Was he being adventurous or dangerous?*  
*What is 'too high'?*  
*Knowing the danger – why did he keep climbing?*  
*How do great climbers come to be?*  
*'He had felt free'. What is this feeling of freedom?*

In the morning workshop session the group chose the question, "How do people, places and things become special to us?" The pair of participants who had generated the question had been

exploring what makes something 'special' for an individual. We considered whether this was emotional, intuitive or learnt response, with participants giving varied examples. We also explored our different understandings of the concept of 'special'.

In the afternoon workshop session, the group chose the question "Why should we share our feelings?" A lively enquiry followed with many different points of view being expressed. We explored the notion of 'sharing' in relation to the concept of 'reviewing' and questioned whether there is always a need for review in outdoor learning. We considered whether we have the right to ask young people to share their experiences, or do the benefits of review outweigh this. Whilst not many of the participants changed their mind about the importance of reviewing, the enquiry had certainly made them think more deeply about it.

*Questions* After the enquiry we made a comparison with questions generated by a class of 7-9 year old children with the same story.  
*Where is Raven Rock?*  
*Why was Raven Rock special to him?*  
*Why was Raven Rock there in the first place?*  
*Why did he want to do something his Mum said not to?*  
*Why do we get frightened about things?*  
*Should we do dangerous things?*  
*Why did the teacher want to know about the special place?*  
*Why didn't he think about another place?*  
*Do we know when we are scared?*  
*What makes us scared?*

Participants heard that the question chosen by the children was "Why did he want to do something his Mum said not to?" Arguably, this is a very good example of a question that we could only ask children to respond to if they have asked it themselves! The questions



also give an indicator of the importance of children generating their own topics for enquiry.

There is often a misconception of Dewey that he supported a progressive education that was 'free and student-driven'. Recent political educational debates around knowledge and skills have certainly alluded to this. However, Dewey strongly advocated that educators need to provide learning with a structure and order that is based on a theory of experience. Likewise with P4C, this is not merely conversation based on what children are interested in, it is a structured and rigorous methodology. Coupled with Outdoor Learning, it has the potential to provide a model of learning that could be highly relevant to future likely proposals for curriculum reform. ■

## INFORMATION

### P4C and Outdoor Experiences

There is a new 1 day workshop for Outdoor Practitioners looking at how to mix P4C and the Outdoors. This is currently being developed with Cumbria Development Education Centre(CDEC) and will run in Cumbria on Friday 8th April 2011. There are plans to follow this at venues across the UK. The course will provide an introduction to P4C, practical stimulus for environmental and outdoor practitioners with guidance on facilitation, review and thinking activities. Please contact CDEC for further details [office@cdec.org.uk](mailto:office@cdec.org.uk)

If you would like a copy of the Raven Rock story or have any further questions or requests for training, please contact Jane on email: [janem641@btinternet.com](mailto:janem641@btinternet.com)



### References

Lipman, M., Sharp, A., & Oscanyan, F. 1980, *Philosophy in the Classroom* (2nd Edition), Temple University Press, Philadelphia.

### Relevant websites

[www.sapere.org.uk](http://www.sapere.org.uk) The national society and training body for P4C in the UK

[www.cdec.org.uk](http://www.cdec.org.uk) Cumbria Development Education Centre: P4C and the Outdoors

### Authors notes

Jane Yates is a qualified teacher and has worked in a variety of Outdoor education and teaching settings, both at primary and university level over 20 years. She is a trainer and trustee for SAPERE, the national society and training body for Philosophy for Children. She has been running weekly P4C sessions at a local primary school for seven years. Her MSc dissertation focused on the extent to which environmental values in children can change through participating in P4C. She has worked on P4C projects with teachers and pupils across the UK, and also in Mexico, India and Nepal. Jane is currently writing an adventure novel for 9-12 year olds.

**Photographs:** All from the author