

Paul Dearlove uses questioning to turn an outdoor education activity into a thinking-skills session

The wall

Some outdoor activities are capable providing opportunities for people of all ages to embark on new learning experiences. How can questioning strategies help groups approach such activities with maximum efficiency and minimum friction? A common process teachers use in outdoor education is *think, do, review* and *change*. Let's explore how questions can help students through that process and set them on a path of independent self-improvement.

We arrive at 'the wall' as part of a journey. The journey started with ice-breakers and moved into trust games. So far, all activities had been fun and all had taken place outdoors (See session plan, Figure 1).

The wall is about three metres high – the challenge is to get your group over the wall without using any special equipment. The students wear helmets and their tutor is

close by to ensure safety and provide support and positive encouragement whenever necessary. The tutor begins by asking questions:

Q. 'What would a good team do before they did this then?'

A. 'Talk to each other?'

Q. 'What would they talk about?'

A. 'How to do it? Who goes when? Who is afraid?'

So with a gentle question and answer session we move from *think* and articulating our thoughts into *plan* into *do* with the students having a go. With some students we may describe the challenge, and then step back and leave them to it – remembering first to remind them about safe lifting techniques.

Figure 1

Session Plan

Aims

- To promote the idea that positive encouragement can have beneficial effects on performance
- To allow the opportunity for exploring the idea that by comparative performances we can highlight positive improvements in performance
- To pursue the idea that valuing others has a beneficial effect on the group ethos
- To allow the group to process the link between an outdoor experience and their everyday life
- To challenge the individuals in the group to make a change in their study strategies that will lead to each of them making an improvement in their own performances
- To allow the group a further chance to work in a small team, and to promote this as a useful life skill

Sequence

- Intro: Physical warm up to minimise injury and as an energiser
- Task 1 *Trust Dive* bench near to the wall
- Task 2 *The Wall* see attached description
- Task 3 *Focussed walk* to the Jungle Gym. Focus is: What can I give to any personal challenge to increase my chances of success?
- Task 4 Circuit 1 Jungle Gym: Targets: to give and receive positive encouragement by the end of the session and to explore how this feels
- Task 5 Everest review
- Task 6 Circuit 2 Jungle Gym
- End game, *The Pit!*

Teachers' Tactics

Tactics to increase the groups' ownership of the tasks:

1. Set up the tasks and allow the group to develop their own solutions
2. Adopt a questioning approach
3. Acknowledge positive behaviours
4. Allow time for mid-task and end-task reviews

The students have discussed their task and are about to have a go. With a great deal of laughter, noise and general confusion, the first few are heaved, pushed, persuaded and pulled over the wall and onto the raised platform beyond. As the task progresses less people stand passively around the bottom and more jostle on the other side trying to help their team-mates over. We are down to the last person. He has been the most involved. He has pushed and cheered his team on and now it's just him. He also happens to be the biggest and strongest person in the group and the others are now faced with the problem of getting him over to join the rest. They do it! To great cheers and general celebration the team pours down the ramp at the back of the wall in a great mood.

Tutor: Okay everyone, gather around! Let's go around the group and gather a word or two that will describe our performance as a team.

Words like 'great', 'brilliant', 'good', 'okay', 'reasonable' come out as we go around the team.

Tutor: Is there anything we could do to make 'good' turn into 'excellent' or 'okay' turn into 'good'?

Suggestions start to come from the group, 'help more', 'push harder', 'choose a lighter person to go last' this one is met with general laughter as they recall their recent struggle.

Tutor: Okay. What were the practical things about helping each other over the wall?

The group comes up with things like 'pushing on their feet', 'giving a bunk up', 'reaching over to help' and so on.

Tutor: These are great! Well Done everyone! Can anyone remember what we did first, before we did the wall?

Group: Think, talked, had ideas, discussed.

Tutor: So we thought, talked and made a plan? Right? Anything else?

Group: We set off to have a go, We did it!

Tutor: And what are we doing now?

Group: Talking/ discussing again

Tutor: Why?

Group: To try to learn what happened!

Tutor: Why should we do that?

Group: To make it better the next time.

Tutor: Okay, so we planned, we did and then we looked back, right?

Group: Yes!

Tutor: Let's do this again, only this time we're going to do it much more efficiently!

A discussion follows between the tutor and the group about, what 'efficiency' is and what might make up a more efficient performance. The group often comes up with ideas like 'time', 'use of people', 'doing it better' as being the kind of things that make up a better performance. Another short





discussion follows about the different ways that are available to us about achieving this increase in efficiency. Quite often someone will come up with an idea about trying to put more than one person over the wall at once. This is discussed and the group decide that the strategy could give them a good chance to achieve their objective. They discuss their new plan, and gather around the base of the wall to make another attempt.

'Okay, is everyone ready? Shall I time it?' (You have already timed the first go just to get some baseline for your review).

The group set off on their new challenge. The task is often performed more efficiently (sometimes not), but always it provides material for your review. The task finishes and the group clatter down the ramp in good spirits. The tutor leads a discussion in a 'round' so everyone shares their impressions about the new performance. The group is reminded about the measures of efficiency and a comparison is made between the two performances. The group has decided that it was 'better'. Okay, so what made it better? Did we use the group better? How about time? Did people feel safe? Why did we improve? The group decide that putting two people over helped a bit. 'We'd done it once and so we knew what to expect'. 'We knew better what to do'. 'Less fear'. 'Talked better'. 'Made a better plan'.

So now the tutor makes a leap into carrying the lessons learned at the wall into other situations in the future. 'Well done team. Does anyone think that thinking, talking, making a plan, doing it, and looking back, and changing helped us to make some progress?' The group decides that it has helped in the process. The tutor now asks the group:

'can anyone think of an example, outside this place, where this strategy of *think, do, review* and *change* might work? For instance, at home or at school?

The team can often see sporting examples or a practical skill, and quotes such as 'practice makes perfect' are often offered as answers. 'Does practice make perfect work?' 'What about taking 100 penalty shots and every one missing the goal. Is that good practice? No? Well what should the kicker have done then?' 'They should have stopped after a few kicks and thought about why the shots were missing and altered the shot accordingly!' 'Well done! That's a good example, any others?'

So a picture comes together where the group decides that it might be possible to have a positive influence on activities by adopting a *think, do, review* and *change* strategy. There are plenty of opportunities to use the strategy in everyday life. The group commits to trying the strategy away from the wall. They've nothing to lose by trying, and perhaps a lot to gain. 'Let me know if it works.'

The whole exercise has lasted about thirty minutes. So we move on!

'Well done everyone, that was really good. Okay, what do you want now as the challenge? Should it be mental or physical? (The reference is to a TV challenge game called *The Crystal Maze*) The group quickly picks up the idea and shout out: 'Physical, Physical' and so the game goes on.

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