

# The listening teacher

A philosopher shares his insight into the responses of both students and teachers alike when basic philosophy is introduced into class to help them better understand one another.



**A** teacher recently reported to me, when reflecting on the impact of the philosophy sessions I had run with her Year 3 class, that she had noticed how the children had started to answer questions differently. Before, they had replied with short answers, whereas now she'd noticed that they had begun to elaborate more. An important shift had happened, but not only in the children; the teacher had begun to inhabit a new mindset: she was listening and asking questions differently. The change in the children was simply the impact of a change in her. The first advice I will give to a teacher asking about how to foster good speaking and listening in a classroom is: speak well and listen well. I've named the mindset she made a shift towards open question mindset (OQM).

**'Is it...?'**

Guess-what's-in-my-head, or, GWIMH-teaching is a very common psychological attitude in teachers who test the children's knowledge through their questioning:

**Teacher (T):** What's the capital of France?

**Student (S):** Is it Paris?

**T:** That's right! Well done!

Or:

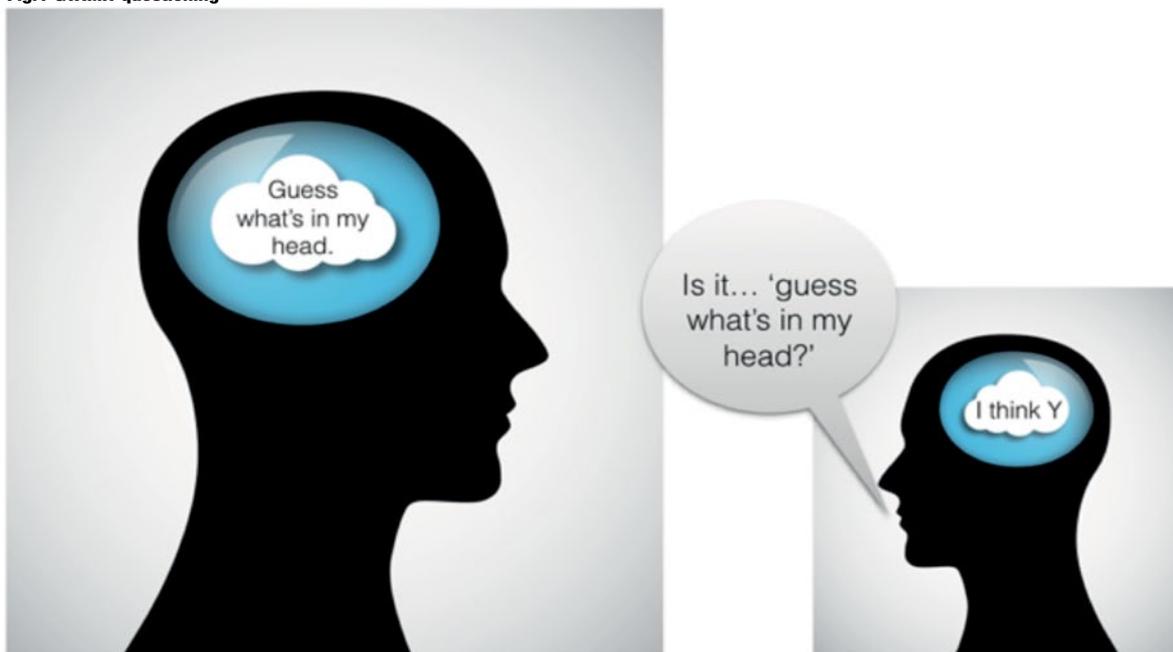
**T:** What's the capital of France?

**S:** Is it wine?

**T:** No. Anyone else?

This kind of teaching does not usually demonstrate OQM.

**Fig.1** GWIMH-questioning

**'So, you're saying...'**

Guess-what's-in-*your*-head, or, GWIYH-teaching is where the teacher tries to work out or infer what a student is thinking, often second-guessing or reconstructing a student's thought-process:

**S:** It's a bird, so it flies.

**T:** So, you're saying that 'all birds fly'.

Notice that the child did not say, 'all birds fly', so the teacher has inferred this from what they did say. One may reconstruct the student's argument like so:

**Arg A**

Premise 1: It's a bird;

[Premise 2: All birds fly];\*

Conclusion: So [Therefore], it flies.

\* [The squared brackets contain what is not said but is thought, believed or implied.]

First of all, let's quickly deal with the jargon.

- Think of a **premise** as 'a reason in support of a conclusion',
- The **conclusion** as 'what it is that is claimed'. In everyday talk the conclusion is usually said first followed by the premises: 'It flies because it's a bird.' ('Therefore' and 'because' are, like 'multiply' and 'divide' in arithmetic, reversible operations)
- 'Premise 2' above is what's known as a **hidden premise**: the belief held by the arguer that is not explicitly stated, but that is logically implied by what has been explicitly stated ('It's a number so it can be counted,' or 'It can be counted because it's a number.' Here, in either formulation, the *hidden premise* – which is usually a *general claim* – is: 'All numbers can be counted'.)

Is 'meaning what one says' the same as 'saying what one means'? (Paraphrased from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by *Lewis Carroll*)

But here's the problem with this kind of inference on the teacher's part: one may not be entitled to infer this kind of implied premise on behalf of a student *even though Premise 2 is logically implied by what has been explicitly stated*. Why not, if it *has* been implied? Well, here's one possibility: the student may not have *meant* what they said; they may have *meant* something like this:

#### Arg B

Premise 1: It's a bird;

Premise 2: [Most birds fly];

Conclusion: Therefore, it [probably] flies.

If the student meant Arg B but said Arg A then the teacher would have jumped the gun if they had inferred what they had above; namely: that the child thinks 'all birds fly'. It would, however, be a perfectly reasonable or understandable 'jumping of the gun', but, nevertheless, incorrect.



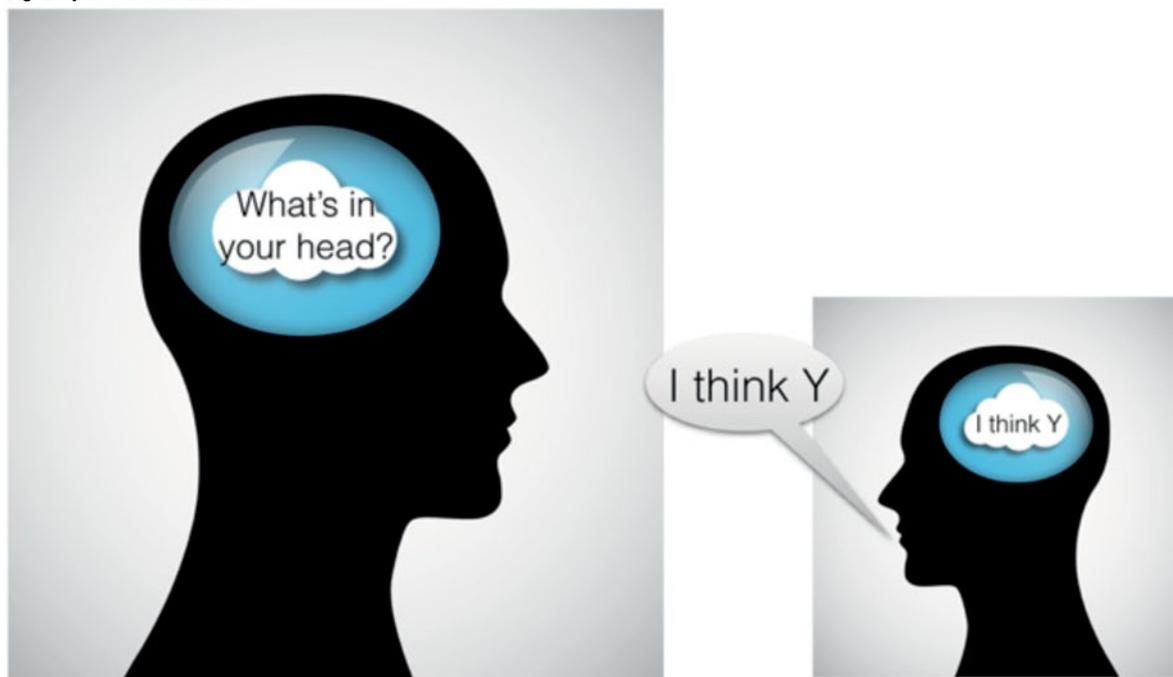
### Archeologists, not historians

Historians construct narratives and sequences of events from incomplete evidence. They are often left with no option but to infer and speculate, sometimes to firmer conclusions and sometimes to more tenuous ones. An archeologist aims to reveal what is there, ideally with the least amount of interference or damage to *what* is found and *how* it is found, so that the historians can do their job more effectively. OQM recommends that teachers think of themselves more like *archeologists*, excavating students' ideas to reveal them as they are, not what they are supposed to be (in both senses of the phrase 'supposed to be' – one sense captures GWIMH and other GWIYH). To do this, one needs to demonstrate what I called 'intentional sensitivity' – sensitivity to what is *meant* or *intended* rather than what is stated or said explicitly. Children in particular (though not *only* children) have a propensity to not properly represent their own ideas accurately with the words they use to express them. Perhaps we should develop a similar sensitivity with adults too.

### Listening for intention and meaning

OQM is a mindset that requires that teachers listen for – and question for – the student's own, authentic cognitive content, whatever it may be; whether it is correct, incorrect or neither.

**Fig. 2 Open Question Mindset**



So, the OQM teacher may proceed as follows:

**S:** It's a bird, so it flies.

**T:** Can you explain why you think that *if it's a bird then it flies*?

**S:** Because most birds fly, don't they?

**T:** [*Echoing*] 'Most birds fly'. Could you say why you think 'most birds fly'?

**S:** Most birds do, except maybe penguins... [*he thinks*]... or birds that have broken their wings.

**T:** So, if 'it's a bird' and 'most birds fly', does that mean that 'it flies'?

**S:** Yeah, unless it's a penguin or a bird with a broken wing ... [*he pauses*]... but then it might get better; then it'll fly!

This teacher has questioned in such a way that, working only with what has been given by the student explicitly, the student has now revealed his true position, one of *high probability* and not *certainty*. On this occasion, it has resulted in the student *qualifying* his answer ('all birds fly *except...*') in light of some of his unearthed beliefs (that 'not all birds fly'; his evidence for this is non-flying birds and injured birds).

### Open and closed questions and OQM

One should not confuse OQM with open questions. The sharp-eyed among you will have noticed that not all the questions asked by the teacher in the latter example were open: the last question was grammatically closed (eliciting a 'yes' or 'no' response). But, importantly, the questioner never went beyond what had been said, she encouraged the *student* to do so by putting what the student had said back to him and then requiring that he consider the implications of what he had said. By doing so, she urged him to reveal more of his cognitive content. Here are some examples of how OQM can be used (or not used) with open or closed questions.



First, an open question but with a *closed* question mindset (GWIMH):

**T:** What do you notice about this poem?

**S:** It's too long!

**T:** Anyone else?

**S:** It's rubbish!

**T:** Do you notice anything else? For instance, does it rhyme?

This teacher clearly has certain things she is expecting, and the answers she's getting are not included in the sorts of things she is looking for. Once she realizes that the open question is not achieving what she wanted, she resorts to *leading questions* ('For instance, does it rhyme?') This is a very common questioning

style employed by many teachers (though, probably not strategically in most cases). It is a common response to the criticism that teachers use too many closed questions. The problem arises when the teacher changes his or her style from closed to open questions without making a corresponding change in his or her mindset. In these kinds of situations confusion usually ensues in the classroom as a result of disingenuousness from the teacher and the children consequently trying to ascertain the hidden agenda; what the teacher is *really* asking. In this situations, my advice to teachers is to be honest and transparent: if you want to teach, *teach* – don't disguise your teaching in disingenuous open enquiry; if you want to tell the students something in particular, *tell them*. And if you want to find out what they think about something, find out what *they think*.

Secondly, closed questions but with an open question mindset:

**T:** Is this a poem? (Closed question)

**Student A:** No.

**T:** Can you say why not? (Opening up the closed question for justification)

**A:** Because it's not long enough?

**T:** Does a poem need to be a certain length? (Closed question)

**Student B:** Not really.

**T:** Go on... (Opening up with a prompt this time)

**B:** Because a poem can be any length?

**T:** So, do you think it's a poem? (Anchoring back to the main question)

**B:** No.

**T:** Interesting. Do you mind saying why not? (Opening up again for justification)

**B:** Because it is not a complete thought.

**T:** [*Echoing*] 'It's not a complete thought'. Could you say what you mean by 'a complete thought'? (Opening up for meaning)



This teacher is clearly interested in the answers given and seems only to be looking for the answers that are offered by the students. I would describe her approach as 'descriptive' not 'prescriptive'.

Thirdly, we have – *possibly* – the most interesting example. Here is an open question used to gather a closed list of answers (e.g. rhyme, rhythm, meter, stanza and so on) but where the teacher is genuinely interested in what else is offered, and in this way demonstrates OQM:

**T:** What is poetry?

**Student A:** It rhymes. [*Teacher writes 'rhyme?' on the board and ticks it off her list*]

**T:** Thank you. What does everyone else think about that?

**Student B:** Poetry doesn't have to rhyme but it *has* to have rhythm. [*Teacher writes 'rhythm?' on the board and ticks it off*]

**A:** Why does it have to have rhythm if it doesn't have to rhyme?

**B:** Okay, maybe it needs one or the other; it's just prose if it's got neither.

**Student C:** I think a poem is a worded thought.

**T:** What a lovely expression: 'a worded thought'. [*She writes up 'a worded thought' on the board*] Can you say more about that? It's certainly not on the list of things I have here! [*Pointing to her lesson plan document then leaning forward to listen with an encouraging smile*]

**C:** Something you think that you find the right words for...



It is also worth pointing out that OQM comes not only from questioning and listening but also from body language, tone, eye contact and so on. Being interested is exactly that: a way of *being*, not just an *employed strategy*. To this extent, a good teacher is a listening one.

### It's right to be wrong!

But what about when there's a right answer and the children get it wrong? I would still recommend encouraging the students to report what they think, even if it's wrong, because it gives you – the teacher – an opportunity to find out *why* they think that that is the answer. Teaching is – or *should* be – about bringing understanding to students (or is it about bringing students to understanding?). If a student does not know or understand something then the first step towards understanding is for the teacher to know what it is the student doesn't comprehend and why. If students stop saying things because they don't want the teacher to know that they don't know something, or are afraid of appearing foolish, then learning opportunities will be missed. An OQM teacher *listens* in order to understand,

*questions* in order to listen, to test for understanding and, perhaps most importantly, to give the students the opportunity to test their own and each others' understanding.

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