

INTRODUCTORY PODCAST

An edited conversation with Phil Tyson

PT

Hello, I'm Phil Tyson, and this podcast is one of a series to support users of the resource titled Question-Led Learning. Its author, Melvin Freestone, is here with me. G'day, Melvin.

MF

G'day, Phil.

PT

In these podcasts, we'll be discussing aspects of the resource, and we'll respond to questions and comments from users. But first, Melvin, could we ask you to give us a brief outline of your background?

MF

Well, Phil, I came to Australia in 1977 from Ireland.

In Ireland I had experience as a teacher in schools and in curriculum development. I was director of a curriculum centre, teacher centre, and did some high-level research in molecular biology taking genes in and out of cells.

Experience

I came out here, the best thing I ever did, and taught on the northwest coast of Tasmania. The Department of Education took me to Hobart to get involved in curriculum work, including some national work on the National Technology Education Project. I was the project leader for over five years. I then returned to teaching at primary and secondary levels.

Since I retired in 2008, I have worked voluntarily in several countries, developing educational projects and helping develop schools and teacher training in countries like India, Thailand, Brunei, and the United States.

Recently, I've done some careful research into the whole field of questioning and questions.

PT

What's your aim, then, in producing this resource?

MF

It's to distil grounded practices that I think are valuable for the future, and to do so in a way that is practical, a practicable resource. It deals with questions based on the belief that everyone is curious.

Grounded practice

When you exercise your curiosity, you ask a question, or a whole series of questions, and that leads you to inquiry. That sets up ways in which we can go about teaching and learning into the future. You could argue that's not how we've gone in the past.

Everyone is curious

Asking questions incites inquiry

It's been answers first, not questions, when both, starting with questions, are needed.

Questions first?

PT

Who would you expect might find this resource useful?

MF

That's a difficult question, Phil, because it's a multi-audience resource. Difficult to put together because different audiences will look for different things.

Multi-audience resource

Teachers, which is a major audience, will come at it from a particular direction, and parents will come at it from their needs and concerns. Teachers and parents are two audiences.

Teachers and parents

It also has an audience in teacher education, both pre-service and in-service.

Teacher education

People have said to me, and I'm a bit shy of this, that some businesses and enterprises might find sections of it useful, but the basic audience, or target audience, is teachers and parents.

Business enterprises

If I were saying things that are important for how kids learn and how teachers teach, then people in curriculum positions outside schools could be interested in it, and I hope they would be. In my experience, curriculum and teaching need to be as close together as possible, hand in glove, if you like.

Curriculum support services

PT

All right, let's now focus in and ask you to explain what you mean by question-led learning.

MF

I'll try, Phil. Go back to what I said originally. Everyone is curious.

Everyone is curious

How do you enact that curiosity? You ask a question, explicitly by saying it, or you might do it implicitly in the back of your mind. But you ask a question. Whatever questions you come up with, direct what you explore.

Enact curiosity by asking a question

What's meant by questions? There are, I think, two ways of looking at it. One is asking questions to direct and shape your inquiry, a strategic process. And when you've got those questions in mind, you use questioning to explore and investigate different aspects of that inquiry, a tactical process.

Questions direct inquiries

Some people say this is just a semantic difference. I don't think it is. I think there is an important functional difference.

Questioning is tactical

Let's say a general question is, is the climate changing in Antarctica? With that in mind, you then might indulge in some questioning. Say, how is the flow of warmer waters underneath the ice shelves likely to affect the melting process?

An illustration

Questions direct. They are strategic and questioning is tactical. Tactical questions include why, where, what, how, when, which may be asked in the present tense,

what is happening now, or what was happening in the past, or what might happen in the future.

I have one other point. One of the things that has fascinated me for a long time is that young children ask a huge number of questions in a day. Some research shows up to 400. Yet, as we go through life, we don't seem to ask as many questions. Perhaps we need to put greater emphasis on questions and questioning? As much, if not more, than we do on the answers side of teaching and learning.

Young children continually ask questions

Put greater emphasis on questions?