

PRACTICE PODCAST

An edited conversation with Phil Tyson

PT

In this podcast, Indicators of Practice, we'll be talking about frames between number 38 and 53 in the resource. To guide us along the way is the author. Melvin, how are you?

MF

G'day Phil. I'm well, thank you very much. You too, I hope.

PT

Would you say the rubber hits the road this time?

MF

The rubber always hits the road, but particularly in this case.

Indicators of practice are reflections on grounded practice, teaching and learning in action. It is not a promised land. None of the examples are intended to be straight doable.

You need to adapt them to your own circumstances, whether that means to different ages and stages, or whether that means to different content and different contexts. They are a series of examples of what question-led learning might look like in practice.

Reflections on
grounded
practices

Indicative
examples only

PT

What's in the Indicators of Practice pages?

MF

There are two sets of examples, Phil. One set of seven or so examples is focused on teaching and learning, and a second set of four examples address professional learning of teachers.

Two sets of
examples

PT

One of them is called Agile Spaces, and I'd like to know more about your choice of the word Agile in this.

MF

Agile means moving quickly and being nimble. If you think about learning, no two learners learn in the same way, or at the same rate, or at the same time. And sometimes the curriculum or the content that they're dealing with is various. We need flexible spaces to enable learners to learn in different ways, to learn in different modes, and to learn in different modalities.

Flexible spaces

Different modes
and modalities

For example, some learners might want to learn on their own. Others might want to work in big group situations. Or the nature of the content, the nature of the inquiry, requires individual or small group work. Or it may require a whole group, to discuss forum style, oftentimes we call it circle time in primary schools. We need to have flexible spaces to enable that to happen.

Yet you can still do that in a box classroom, albeit with difficulty, by organising things in different areas within the room. But the concept is one of flexible space to enable flexible action according to the learning needs of learners, and the learning needs of the inquiries in which they're engaged.

Difficult yet possible in a box classroom

PT

Frame 38 is intriguing me. There's a diagram right in the centre that appears to be a perspective drawing.

MF

Yes, it is. There are two threads behind the drawing. One is the idea of the thinking going from simple to complex, hence the diagram expands. The second is growth in the dialogue or conversations amongst learners, and learners and teachers. It goes from having a sense of certainty, we know what that's about, to getting more mature to appreciate the uncertainty in things, yet without becoming uncertain within oneself. The diagram draws attention to growth in thinking and progression in dialogue. Thank you.

Growth in thinking and dialogue

PT

Turning to frame 40 now, there are eight statements about the samples and how they can be used, which I thought were very helpful, well worth a read before exploring the examples.

You are, I think, reinforcing the point you made earlier that the samples are not prescriptive and should be adapted, personalised and negotiated to meet circumstances and needs.

Need to be personalised and customised

MF

Exactly, Phil. There are two things we need to bear in mind. One is a yes-no possibly dimension through which potential ideas are explored by looking constructively for possibilities. At the same time, a falsification mindset is needed through which 'this or that' won't work, it's not appropriate, or whatever are considered. These two mindsets are important when you look at each indicator of practice. Be aware of their limitations and their positive aspects.

An open yet critical approach

Some key issues are listed which are intended to incite discussion. The samples of practice are not recipes. You need to personalise and customise them to different situations and inquiries. As you say, Phil, they need to be negotiated. They vary in duration, and they would likely use a range of learning tools, some of which are outlined in another section of our question-led learning resource.

Negotiation important

PT

Moving right along to frame 41, we meet some familiar texts and diagrams. Why are they there?

MF

They're there because that's the basic design in which the examples are articulated. With question framing in mind, the process was getting started, moving forwards and drawing things together. At the same time, using the double diamond process of first designing and exploring, evolving into developing and enacting.

Natural process

PT

I think it might be helpful to look at how you've structured the examples. Could we take energy flow, for example, and it's frame 47, and describe what your intentions were with the different sections.

MF

The white parts are translations of what I've just said. If you like, the first part being the questioning part, the second part being the exploring part of it, and the third part of it being enacting around the double diamond process.

Getting started,
moving forwards
and drawing
together

You will notice that there are some grey screen boxes above and below the white boxes. These are caveats or explanations. Some of them explain, for example, the generic generative questions chosen, or other important things like enabling learners to voice their emotions and allowing different learners to be quiet and say nothing.

In the case of energy flow, you will notice that the scenario is made plain at the beginning. And the challenge that learners are facing is also clear.

To get started we position by exploring what is the difference between sustainable and renewable energy. By going into some introductory materials, viewing videos, and goodness knows whatever else. Perhaps go through newspaper articles from different newspapers, which promulgate different views.

Getting started

Also positioning in terms of where the learners are. What do you know about this? What do you think about this? What's your interest in? And what are the key purposes teachers have in taking a particular question-led study on board? Then you might open up by asking learners in groups to come up with their own views, and in so doing, listen to the differing viewpoints and opinions of group members. And at the same time, establish responsibilities within each group. Who's going to do what, why, and what's expected.

Moving forwards

Then, depending on the question-led inquiry to hand, you might identify some generic generative questions. We emphasized in previous podcasts two or three of the most relevant ones. On occasion, the teacher might choose them, or a learner who learns best on his or her own may say, 'I like to make the choice myself', or they might be negotiated with groups of learners, or whatever. And then you go to the next white box, which is into an iterative structure of moving forwards. An exploration stage.

There are all kinds of ways to explore the generative questions that have been identified. Of course, the first step in question-led learning approach that we're putting is to identify consequent questions that can be investigated. And not only that, design realistic tasks to enact them. The process is not all over the place. It is quite targeted, but it's also very open at the same time.

I need to say, Phil, and I think we mentioned it in one of the previous podcasts, there's a symbiotic relationship between inquiry and direct teaching. Some direct teaching needs to be continuous and autonomous, and quite structured and sequenced, and at other times, it grows out of the inquiry. In this

Balance inquiries
with direct
teaching as
appropriate

energy flow example, structured experiments might be carried out into electrical systems and networks, as well as relationships between current, voltage, and resistance, which is Ohm's law. In my view, much inquiry-based learning, for the best will in the world, has got this symbiotic relationship out of sync.

Then move on to the next white box, drawing things together. You'll produce a PowerPoint, or similar, on how you would go about energy flow in your local community in the next 10 years, and how that might change with renewables, or explain different ways of conserving the energy through insulation and changing lifestyles.

We started off with these generative questions and these consequent questions. Now, to what extent has our study or investigation addressed these questions? And what are the next or emerging ones that are beyond that? Also, taking time to reflect on how my learning has gone and discover my learning patterns.

There's lots of suggestions in these examples in the question-led learning resource. That said, the artistry of the teachers is crucial, and in so doing, teachers and learners are likely to find many better ways and means.

PT

I can see the structured development process that you spoke about last time. I think it was in frame 23, is that right?

MF

That's correct, Phil. The performances are clearly enacted in the examples of practice. We looked at the energy flow example in some detail. Would you like to look at other ones?

PT

Yes, one for younger, perhaps less sophisticated learners.

MF

Less sophisticated or not! Let's take the artistic expose one. The situation or scenario is appreciating the feelings that people have and the emotions that people have. A good example of where you pitch an inquiry. If it's a question of understanding my own emotions, then it might be for younger learners. If it's understanding emotions in other people, that is more demanding. But even in the early childhood level, being aware of the feelings that other people have is crucial.

One of the suggestions focuses on pets. The positioning could, for example, involve learners bringing photographs of their favourite pets into school and having them loaded up onto the school's electronic resources by the support people. Then using this resource material, have each learner talk about my favourite dog, my favourite cat, my hamster, or whatever, and perhaps my favourite sheep. Why it's my pet, how I feel about it, and look after it. Hearing people talk about their feelings can be very valuable, albeit a sensitive process.

Talking about feelings can be difficult for some children. Sensitive teaching strategies and appropriate cultural conditions are important if a study like this is to

Drawing together

Reflective
metacognition

Pitching an
inquiry

Real-life issues
and contexts

Sensitive and
respectful
environment

work. Once some generic generative questions, responsibility, care, and ethical, in this example, are identified, the process of moving forwards comes into play, such as exploring consequent questions by looking at the issue of seeing eye dogs and the role they play in people's lives.

Question framing
in a context

If you wanted the learners to sketch some of their ideas and how they feel in specific situations, you might go on to some direct teaching about perspective and symmetry and asymmetry in a painting or a drawing. You then might ask learners in groups to create a short drama on our responsibilities with animals. Teachers working with learners could come up with a whole range of different ways to bring such a drama into action.

Teaching 'arts
skills'

Artistic
expression

You might then ask learners to prepare a series of visualizations or poems as a culminating process. If learners are keeping a personal journal, they could record reflections on their feelings and the feelings of other people in general and or around the issue of pets.

Visual and
linguistic thinking

It's very hard to do adequate justice filling the conversation like this to what is in the ideas for practice section of question-led learning. When people read the details in the artistic exposé example, or any of the others, there's a richness to it which I can't cover within this medium.

PT

Well now, let's talk about frame 49. Why is discerned significance of importance?

MF

It's important because one of the crucial matters in the current day and age is handling information. We live in a digital age where access to information is huge. In the olden times it was read on the line, between the lines and behind the lines. Now it's in a multimedia context.

Increasingly
important in a
modern world

The 'discern significance' example deals with multiple areas or fields of learning. The shared goal was to analyse media articles, which might be newspapers, everything through to multimedia productions and the like. Look at the authenticity and the reliability of what has been said or done in the media examples.

Encourage learners to voice their reactions in groups and do so by postponing hasty judgments. People will have different perceptions and personal interests. Getting these discussed early is important, then reorganizing work groups in terms of their interests as well as their capabilities and social compatibility. For instance, some learners might be good talkers, others might be good writers. Which is important in creating 'forum' situations where the value of media productions can be explored. You could almost say by means of democratic inquiry.

Sharing
perspectives
informs others

Forming inquiry
teams

PT

Assessment in action is different from the preceding examples. Frame 50 seems to be spelling out a professional development application of question-led inquiry. Is that the case?

MF

My word, it is, Phil. I remember at a conference overseas, the issue from the plenary floor was teachers or learners.

To answer your question directly, yes, the assessment example is directed towards the professional development of teachers. The same model in frame 23 can be applied to the professional development of teachers. I won't go into detail of what's there, but the same pattern as the one discussed earlier is used.

Question-led learning applies to teachers

PT

That leads me to refer to frame 51 titled Integration in Learning. It's an exploration of integration, the theory and practice.

What do you think might be the ideal outcomes for, say, school staff having engaged in a dialogue about this?

MF

Many. Overall, the learning would be connected. It wouldn't be boxed in silos. You might be focusing on one aspect quite tightly. You could call that a silo, but I wouldn't call it a silo at all. It's just a particular focus. At the same time, it would be connected to other things within the content of studies and connected to real life. Learners know about real life, and we ought to make that connection very powerful

Connectedness in learning

Secondly, teachers would have confidence in what different teachers were doing and an understanding of why they were doing it. If the conversations involved going through different age levels, they would also see connectedness in terms of the growth of capability among learners, and they might become personally empowered to facilitate this connectedness.

Connectedness in programs

Integration should 'fuel' what we all know about learning. That is, it is about making connections.

PT

If you were allowed three points to summarize what we've been talking about today, Melvin, what would they be?

MF

Well, Phil, for once in my life, I'm going to say that's easy. The ideas in the Indicators for Practice section are practicable, they are malleable, and they are scalable.

PT

Thank you, Melvin. Next time, quality learning is on the agenda, and we hope you'll join us.