

Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) Action Research Project

Thinking Folk

Newcastle City Learning – June 2022

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For further information regarding the Shaping Success Action Research programme and this project go to <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-8/>.

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Newcastle City Learning

SUMMARY

This project introduced Socratic dialogues as a pedagogical construct for ESOL tutors to use to develop their critical thinking skills by drawing on the lived experiences of BAME learners. The resulting conversations were soon described as 'real' talk by learners, which, in a process that not only developed the authentic use of English language, also enabled them to recognise the common bonds that make us all human. The project led to a curriculum rethink and a commitment to dedicating one day a week to participatory ESOL learning activities.

RATIONALE

Our findings from whole service lesson visits revealed that critical thinking and questioning were key areas for development. In addition to this, very few lessons drew on the rich resource of learners' personal histories. When critical thinking was evident it tended to be focused on occasional questions rather than activities designed for the sole purpose of its development. This project introduced Socratic dialogues to ESOL tutors to develop learners' critical thinking skills by drawing on their lived experiences. This activity had originally been inspired by a similar project implemented by Danish adult educators to counter isolation during the first Covid 19 pandemic lockdown. (The Danish People's Education Council, 2020). Engaging in conversations that explore life's 'big' questions has a long tradition in Denmark due to the Danish Folk High School movement making it a central pillar of their pedagogy (Danish Folk High School, 2022).

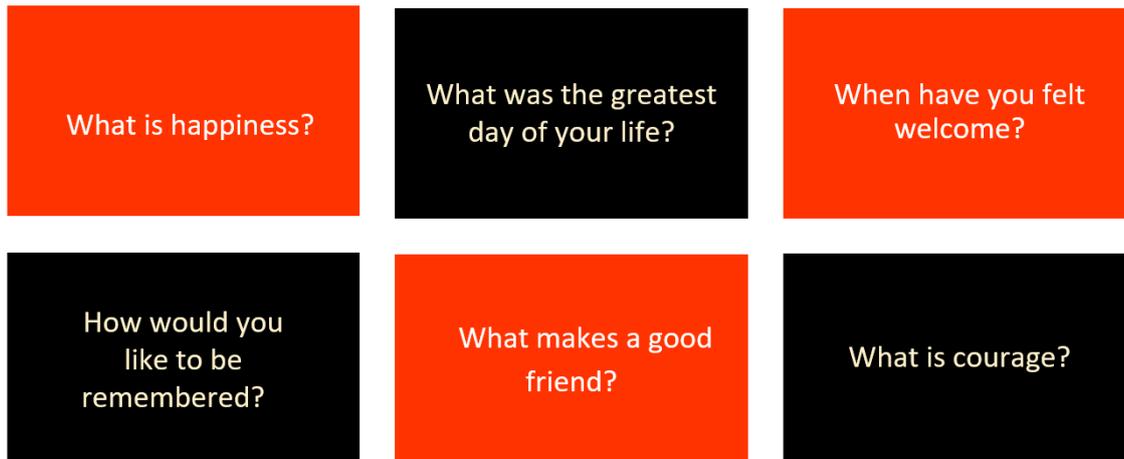
Other Contextual Information

Newcastle City Learning is one of the largest local authority adult learning providers in the North-East, and our largest area of provision is for ESOL learners. Our learner demographic is represented by over fifty nationalities, with the Bangladeshi community being the largest group represented. Around 11% of Newcastle's total population are Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic (BAME), which rises to 24% among school-age children (Newcastle Council, 2021). With a department of over twenty staff, this research activity was contributed to by four tutors and over a hundred learners.

APPROACH

The Thinking Folk project is focused on developing working practices within the ESOL department but also to stimulate wider appeal across the college. CPD sessions were attended by tutors from a range of subject specialisms. In total approximately thirty tutors attended sessions, along with external stakeholders who work directly with the BAME community, including the local authority's 'City of Sanctuary' active inclusion team. To support sessions, we set-up a Google Classroom as a collaborative space in which resources and successful questions could be shared.

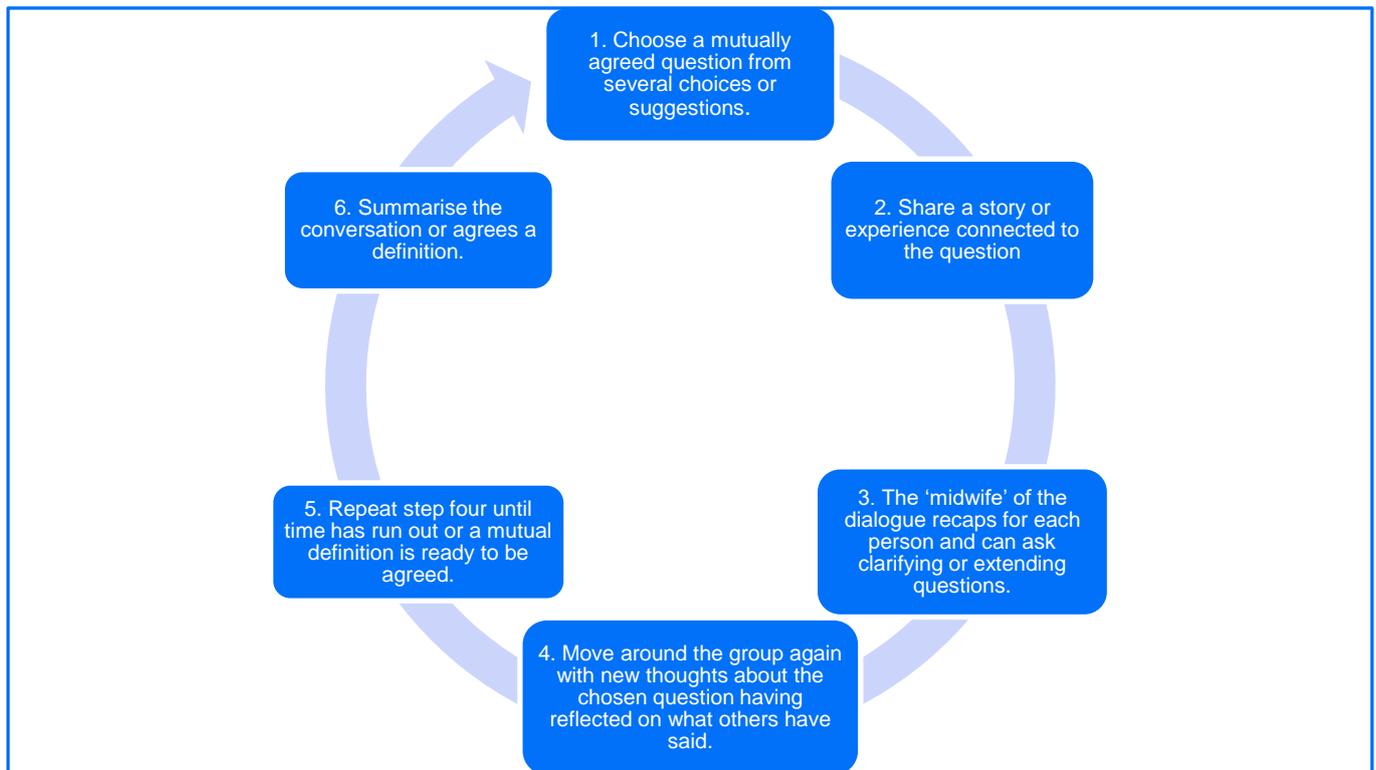
This research activity followed the characteristic steps of a Socratic dialogue in the tradition of



Leonard Nelson (1882-1927) and Gustav Heckmann (1898-1996). In Ancient Greece these dialogues were known as *mauetics*, from the Greek for 'midwife'.

The dialogues follow a deceptively simple process. First, a selection of questions is chosen, either using ethical terms - What is honesty? - or alternatively an open question such as, Why is time important? Questions are chosen on the premise that participants are afforded an opportunity to reflect on their lives and those of others. Next the dialogue participants are invited to give a personal memory-based narrative, in which they once experienced the topic at stake. In the next phase these narratives are reflected upon and investigated in order to make initial definitions about what the topic means according to each narrative. One tutor noted in their narrative reflection, "*A student gave an example of a country he'd lived in where he thought people were too focused on the past and another country where people live more in the present. He said that living in the present is better for mental health because you can't change the past, but you can decide what you do now in the present.*"

This stage is repeated until time has run out or a definition or conclusion has been mutually agreed from the different narratives and reflections that have been shared (Krohn, 2004, p17-20).



Steps of a Socratic Dialogue

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

ESOL tutors quickly realised that the Socratic dialogues they were leading were conversations that replicated the 'Production' element of the Presentation, Practice and Production Method of language acquisition. Research indicates that expecting people to use 'presented' and 'practised' language effectively in the 'production' phase is unrealistic. As Willis points out, *'It is difficult to see how activities can be regarded as truly communicative if the learners' main objective is not to achieve some outcome through the use of language, but to demonstrate to the teacher their control of the*

target form.' (1990:4-5). Instead, learners need to be given the opportunity through task-based activities to simply throw all their language together and mutually strive for meaning *'Since risk-taking is an important ingredient of natural learning and the search for perfection and fully defined linguistic goals does not allow for variety'* (Willis, 1993). As one tutor commented *'Students were so keen to express themselves that they used any words they knew to get their point across to the group.'* This

Everyone in the group spoke, even the least confident student

striving for meaning without feeling anxious about grammatical errors, built confidence and esteem in our learners. One tutor noted, *“Everyone in the group spoke, even the least confident student. She is a new student who worries about making mistakes when she speaks. I could see her becoming more confident as the discussion went on and she realised that everyone was listening to what she was saying and not how she was saying it. She has been more confident in class since the Socratic dialogue too.”*

Tutors also commented on how the conversations generated mutually supportive relationships and shifted the learning dynamic from being tutor-directed to one of collaborative learning, *‘If someone didn’t understand a word, the other students automatically explained the meaning of the word to help each other to understand.’* Likewise, a tutor commented that *‘I found that the students were naturally turn taking because they were genuinely interested in hearing the opinions of others in the group.’* We also noticed that the ensuing development of mutual understanding and respect helped with the creation of *‘a positive classroom environment where everyone can relate better to each*



other as individuals.’ Simply put by a learner, *‘it’s good to speak to different people and learn about different countries.’* Perhaps the most telling feedback, considering the impact of Covid 19 on all our lives, came from a tutor who believed that the conversations impacted on their mental health and wellbeing as, *“it helps me to feel more connected to others again.”*

Professional Development

Professional Standard	How our project outcomes demonstrate this standard
5. Value and promote social and cultural diversity, equality of opportunity and inclusion.	Our project provided a platform in which social and cultural diversity could be shared, understood and celebrated. Despite following a procedure, the resulting dialogues mirrored the ‘café’ conversation of everyday life, bringing an authenticity to learning that brought learners and tutors together in greater mutuality.
6. Build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and learners.	Our project was built on the foundation of promoting togetherness. The process of sharing glimpses of learners’ lives resulted in participants reporting that they tangibly felt closer and understood each other better. Importantly, the positive relationships were built on equality and in some ways were a naturally occurring by-product of each dialogue. The introduction of a Google classroom resource sharing space provided a space in which tutors not only shared resources but also shared and discussed experiences.
10. Evaluate your practice with others and assess its impact on learning.	Our project gave tutors the opportunity to talk about and evaluate learning differently. In a profession bogged down by data and administration procedures the project allowed tutors to think with greater professional reflexivity and talk instead about the ‘tangible immeasurables’ or the usefulness of what Alan Tuckett (2015) called ‘seriously useless learning’.

Organisational Development

The promotion and celebration of different perspectives and insights was integral to our research activity. What was most striking was the significant impact on how tutors viewed 'talk' as a learning activity. Rather than 'talk' as means to an end those tutors who participated began to understand its value as an end in itself. Despite initial scepticism from some colleagues and subject specialisms, the ease of 'giving it a try' dispelled initial beliefs that the activity might only be suitable for certain subjects or with linguistically competent English speakers. The idea of 'giving it a try' fed directly into an organisational priority to develop more pedagogical risk taking and was taken up in other curriculum areas such as digital skills and LLDD programmes. Through the sharing of experiences, it became apparent that tutors, regardless of their specialism, could acknowledge that the dialogues led to positive and collaborative relationships that promoted mutual understanding and inclusion. As one tutor commented, *'I've never learned so much by feeling that I've done so little'*. Another theme from these cross-specialist conversations was the shared experience by many of continuing to think about questions after dialogues had concluded. A number of tutors reflected that the conversations 'got inside their head', whilst one learner put it as *'I keep on thinking afterwards'*.



I've never learned so much by feeling that I've done so little'
Tutor

LEARNING FROM THIS PROJECT

What then of the implications for educational praxis? The following are three tentative suggestions based on this project.

Life is full of 'big questions', and this project taught us to be bold enough to know that they transcend lists of knowledge and skills criteria and appreciate their importance. One of the residual traditions of adult learning is that it should be grounded in, and respectful of, the lived experience of learners, and this project reminded us why.

Brian Simon (1915-2002,) the English Educationalist and Historian, believed that education has the power to help people think, question and be sceptical (1998). Using philosophical questioning through Socratic dialogues made us realise that we are all philosophers, and that such conversations have the power to develop, not only critical thinking, but also mutual understanding and inclusion. This was evidenced by our learners' comments and our observations of learners expressing their thoughts and feelings, making connections and making friends.

"When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought" (Zeldin, 1998, p98). This simple quote encapsulates why talk, discussion, dialogue, conversation, whichever word is chosen, is so important in learning. The participants in this research activity called it 'real' or 'authentic' talk. Through what we have learned during this project we have now made 'Talk' training and participatory ESOL activities integral to what we do. Sometimes new initiatives change practice and

occasionally they truly change thinking. For us it was the latter, and as one tutor commented 'These conversations stay in your head afterwards and I really wasn't expecting that'.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The Project Team

Project Role	Name	Job Role	Contact
Project Lead	Garry Nicholson	Adult Learning and Skills Manager	garry.nicholson@newcastle.gov.uk
Project Deputy	Lucy Cawley	ESOL Coordinator	lucy.cawley@newcastle.gov.uk
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Project Team	Maryam Pottinger	ESOL Adult Learning and Skills Tutor	maryam.pottinger@newcastle.gov.uk
Mentor	Sue Southwood	Mentor	suesouthwood@mail.com
Research Group Lead	Bob Read	RGL	Bobread945@gmail.com

Appendix 2: Learner Case Studies

Learner Case Study 1

She comes from Vietnam originally and is in her late 40s. She has only been in the UK since September 2021 and joined her ESOL Entry 2 class with us in January 2022. This is her first experience of attending an English class in the UK. She has had very little previous experience of learning English, having studied the language for only one year in her country. When the learner first started class, she was very hesitant about speaking out, in both small group and whole class situations and repeatedly said that she felt that her English wasn't good. Despite her low confidence, the learner signed up to come along to the Thinking Folk Project discussion in her first week on the course. At the start of the discussion, she said one sentence and then stopped, saying that her English wasn't good. I reassured her that we were all just interested in hearing her ideas and no one was judging how correct her English was. I said that it was ok for her to just listen for a while and then to speak anytime she wanted to. After hearing a few more learners speak, this learner spoke out voluntarily without being prompted to do so and contributed some interesting ideas to the discussion. I could see her confidence growing throughout this first discussion and her fluency improving as her focus shifted from whether she was speaking correctly to wanting to share her thoughts and experiences with the group.

She has now been to several Socratic Dialogue discussions and comes to them as often as she can. She always participates actively now, without hesitation. I have also noticed that the learner has become more confident during lessons since starting to take part in Socratic Dialogues and will speak out in class and ask questions a lot more than before.

In addition to helping the learner's English and confidence, participating in the Thinking Folk Project has helped her to get to know her classmates and settle into the group. As the learner hasn't been in the UK for long, she didn't know many people here. She has started to make friends in the class, and I think that participating in the Thinking Folk Project has helped her to make friends more quickly.

Learner Case Study 2

He was new to the group and in class he was normally quite shy to speak because the others can be quite vocal. He did not put his name down for the first Thinking Folk session but was interested by what others were saying about it. He came the second week and at the end he told me that it was the first ever 'true' conversation he'd had in English. He was so happy and animated he asked if he could come back the following week. When he came, he talked about the reasons why he had come to the UK, and I found out that he had come for political asylum and that he had written two books. It was so moving when he explained that he felt liberated to be able to talk freely about the situation in his country. His confidence has really grown now, and he asks me more about language issues and misunderstandings. He also speaks much more freely in class than he did before. He now comes regularly because he wants to talk with like-minded people.

Appendix 3: Thinking Folk Conversation Example Highlights

My name is Karen and I come from Newcastle.

My name is Ahmed and I'm from in Europe.

Hello everyone. My name is Stefania and I'm from Romania.

Hello everyone. My name is Aisha, I am from Germany. Hello, everyone.

I've got four questions we've got why is it important to welcome people? How do you make people feel welcome? When have you felt welcome? And what does it mean to be generous? Which of these questions would you like to discuss first?

So, let's start with- When have you felt welcome?

Karen (tutor)

I'm thinking of myself, and I've obviously lived in another country as well. And I'm also thinking about when maybe your children start school, or when you start a new job, it's also really important to feel welcome. When you go to another country, you can feel quite alone, you can feel like everybody else knows each other, You can feel a bit stressed, you can feel a bit worried, you have all of these very strong personal feelings. So, whether it's starting a new job with your colleagues, and they say, 'come in, come in have a cup of coffee, Karen sit down', or when it's children starting school, it's such an important thing to feel that you're not alone?

Ahmed

Just to be kind I think a neighbor is first thing is very, very important. When you live at home, you must be kind with neighbors because this is also your friends and you're saying look the families also but it's not near to you and not in the city isn't another system.

Karen (tutor)

So, neighbours can make us feel welcome. Can anyone tell us about a neighbor who has made them feel welcome?

Aisha

I shipped here from Germany. I also very nervous because it's totally changed for me language and environment are everything. Then my neighbors really kindly and they make me a comfort now sometimes they every time comes when you need it and help when you want to speak, and we can understand you don't have too much speak good English. It's good experience for you because the first year I was nervous what happened. It's generally to find people in the UK do welcome ... in generally there are very good very good people. For example, I have my neighbour, she's old lady, I think she's 80 years now. And she knows my little son for the first time we met I think, and she know my son from that time and all the time when done go to nursery and the primary school my son say hello. She always say hello and help me.

Karen (tutor)

Can you think of a time Stefania?

Stefania

I apply for my job; in my mind they don't accept me because my language is not very good. And I have a lot of stuff in my mind, and I say oh, no, no, no, this is not for me. And when I heard the interview the manager of the school says okay don't be worried because you are very good and you need to have trust in you and everything is fine okay, I accepted you but why my English is not good? And she said I accepted because I want to give you a chance because you look like a kind person. I want to give you a chance that the language is not important for me it's important how to comfort the children.

The conversation continues and more stories of experience are shared...

Appendix 4: Example questions

1. What is a good job?
2. What is happiness?
3. How is food more than just eating?
4. What is the most challenging thing about living in a different country?
5. What makes a good friend?
6. Why are celebrations important?
7. In what ways are clothes important?
8. What are the best and worst parts of human nature?
9. What does it mean to be successful in life?
10. How would you like to be remembered?
11. What is a home?
12. What is the difference between living and being alive?
13. What was the greatest day of your life?
14. What does being a “digital citizen” mean to you?
15. Why is time important?

Appendix 5: Participants and Stakeholders

No of learners?	300	No of staff?	5
No of organisations?	1	No of employers/ stakeholders?	1

Appendix 6: Research/ Evaluation Approach

Participant/observer (e.g. practitioner reflective accounts, logs)	X	Interview/survey (e.g. polls, questionnaires, learner interviews)	
Observation of practice (in person, video, observation notes)	X	Document analysis (e.g. learner work, session plans, annotated resources, policies)	
Custom test/assessment (of knowledge, skill, attitude, participation) for your 'intervention'		High-stakes learner assessment (e.g. A Level results, End Point Assessment, BTECs)	
Before/after assessment (e.g. measures of progress or change in attainment, participation)		Comparative trial (e.g. comparing participants' outcomes against a 'control' group)	
Other (specify):	Action Research		

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