



The joy of not knowing

Children and staff at Hertford Infant and Nursery School love ‘not knowing’... but why? In the first of a two-part series on the pedagogic tools and strategies that have proved successful in his school, headteacher

Marcelo Staricoff explains how the philosophy of enjoying not knowing has helped turn his students into confident, enthusiastic learners and skilled critical thinkers.



I have always been fascinated by the ability to present learning to children in a way that is perceived by them as being fun and playful, while still maintaining all the required academic content, rigour, depth and progression.

I suppose that the closest one comes to this approach in our education system is in the pedagogy that underpins the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. When I was appointed to my first headship at Hertford Infant and Nursery School in January 2009, I was very keen to develop a whole-school approach to teaching and learning based on

A school with just one rule

Establishing a set of core values for our school was a crucial first step towards establishing a JONK culture of learning. I was very keen to experiment with creating a school with no rules, but one that was driven through a set of mutually agreed values.

Establishing the values took us the best part of two years. During this time, the children, families, staff, governors and the local community all had the opportunity to express what was really important to them as individuals, as learners and as members of our school, local, national and global community.

The consultation process led us to finally agree on six words that encompassed all our thoughts and feelings, which are now our school values. These are:

- Friendly
- Caring
- Thoughtful
- Respectful
- Enthusiastic
- Ambitious

The language that accompanies each of these values soon began to permeate the school and completely transformed the way that we communicate with each other and the way in which we are now able to deal with problems when they arise.

We really wanted the values to be very visual and very prominent in our school environment, so we set up a collaboration with a photographer from Big Art Canvas, a local business. We found photographs of our children illustrating each of the values and placed them on canvases, which now adorn all areas of the school like an art gallery! The canvases have not only become a very special component of how the school looks and feels, but they also act as great motivators for discussion, particularly with visitors and prospective families.



We are delighted that the words and sentiments that accompany each of our values are not just confined to promoting how we are striving to be with each other, but they all encompass how we should regard and treat resources, the building and the outdoor environment.

The children in one of our Year 1 classes (Puffins) were so inspired by the

idea of the values that they created a poem based on the ways they illustrate these values at home and in school. Each line of the poem began with 'I like me because...' and included such lines as, 'I like me because I put my hand up', 'because I give my sister sweets', 'because I'm fast at running and long jump', 'because I listen to people', 'because I always try my best', 'because I let my friends go in front of me', 'because I never feel unlike me'. The fact that the values made the children feel good about themselves was great to see, as developing our students' self-esteem lies at the heart at what we are always striving to do.

Starting to live through the sentiments of the values enabled us to dispel with all our school rules. I soon realised however, that in order to establish a truly successful JONK culture, we did need to have one very important rule: 'In our school, no one is allowed to worry!'

The decision to ban worrying is linked to the fact that the principles underpinning the JONK approach are all based on removing any fears or worries that the children may have, especially if these are associated with school or with their learning.

'It's really good not to know!'

Having established our set of values, the next challenge was to see if we could get the children to start to perceive school and learning as a really enjoyable part of their daily lives and for school to represent a seamless continuation of their family and home lives, rather than something completely different.

At Hertford, we are fascinated by philosophy, and by the power that philosophy has to enable us to think about things in completely different ways. So proposing to them that in school and in life, it is 'really good to not know', was a great way to begin our quest for developing the love of school and of learning that we were so keen to transmit. Although at first this seemed to be a rather puzzling concept, when we started to unravel the meaning within the phrase, the children found that it actually made a lot of sense. Our reasoning with the children was that in order to learn something new, we must not know it first! The children loved it straight away and they found it a very easy concept to understand, discuss and explain.

We now introduce the children and their families to the concepts of the 'Joy of Not Knowing' and how good it is to not know when they first visit the school, and then again, as soon as the children start at the school.

Although this way of referring to our learning seems a little bit perplexing to anyone hearing it for the first time, we have found that it actually acts as a great catalyst for conversations in what we believe in and in how we approach the teaching and learning at the school.

The phrase also helps us to plant the seeds of meta-cognition and enthusiasm for learning from the earliest possible moment. From a personal point of view, this approach has proved incredibly rewarding. The children love telling everyone that they enjoy not knowing, and there is nothing more wonderful than when families arrive at school and begin to share their anecdotes at the gate about how they've spent their evenings discussing with their children the advantages and disadvantages of not knowing!

Knowing 'how to know'

The school values and the concept of enjoying not knowing contributed enormously towards enabling the children to feel emotionally secure, confident and successful as individuals. However, enjoying not knowing relies on being able to then know 'how to know'! Could we now use the JONK approach to enable the children to feel successful as learners?

We chose to try to do this by introducing the children to six lifelong learning characteristics. These would hopefully affect their learning in the same way the values did their self-esteem. We started by adapting the language associated

with the lifelong learning characteristics originally described in the Educational Lifelong Learning Inventory Research Project or ELLI², as we wanted to make sure that the language and terminology we were using to define and explain each of the dimensions was appropriate for our school's age group³. As with the values, we really wanted the children to be able to feel a close association to sentiments behind each one.

To promote the skills and attitudes that would help the children feel successful as learners now and in the future, we decided to focus on the following lifelong learning dimensions:

- Planning
- Creative
- Questioning
- Connecting
- Communicating
- Persevering

The ELLI study also demonstrated that linking the learning dimensions to animals helps children to more easily understand the attitudes each dimension is trying to instil in them. For example, explaining that a snail is 'persevering' gives the message that even if it takes a lot of time and effort, it pays to keep trying to achieve your goals or to find another way to achieve them. Translated into a classroom environment, this could mean working at finding the right method to solve a problem or to structure thoughts in a coherent way.

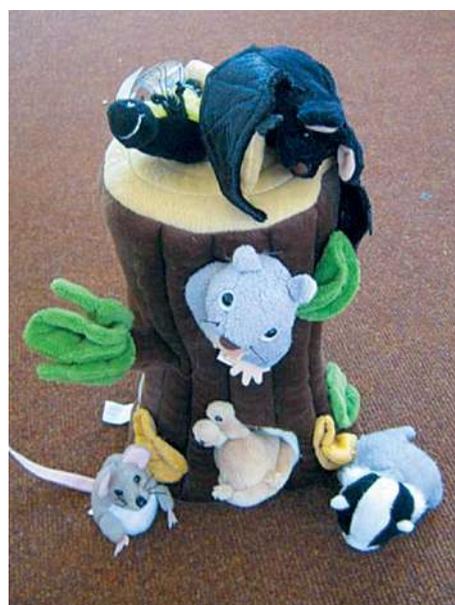
We chose to represent each dimension through an animal that could be found in our local environment. The links are as follows:

Learning Dimension	Animal
Planning	Bat
Creativity	Squirrel
Questioning	Mouse
Connecting	Badger
Communicating	Bee
Persevering	Snail

To our huge surprise, we found that we could acquire these animals as finger puppets all living inside a tree. As our school emblem is a tree, this could not have been more perfect! Every class and every area of the school now possesses a Hertford Learning Tree with all the animals inside, and the children love to take them out and use them to help them with their learning.

We then thought it would be a very good idea if we linked each of the lifelong learning dimensions to one of our school values. So our animals now model for us how to behave as people and how to improve as a learner:

- The Bat, being thoughtful, is good at planning.
- The Squirrel, being enthusiastic, is good at creative thinking.
- The Mouse, being friendly, is good at questioning.
- The Badger, being caring, is good at connecting thinking.
- The Bee, being respectful, is good at communicating.
- The Snail, being ambitious, is good at persevering and not giving up.



As you can see, each of the animals also has been given a colour based on De Bono's Thinking Hats⁴, so now the animals can also model for us how to be really good at thinking!

Once all these links had been made, the teachers decided to write a story about each animal describing how they acquired their particular skills and characteristics. We then shared the stories with the children in assemblies. The stories have become a very useful tool for introducing all the concepts and for helping the children understand what we mean by each one. For an example story, see 'The story of the snail' at the end of this article.

Once the stories were shared with children and the concepts behind each one discussed, we asked the children to express in their own words what they understood each dimension to mean. We were absolutely delighted by what they created (see figure 1).

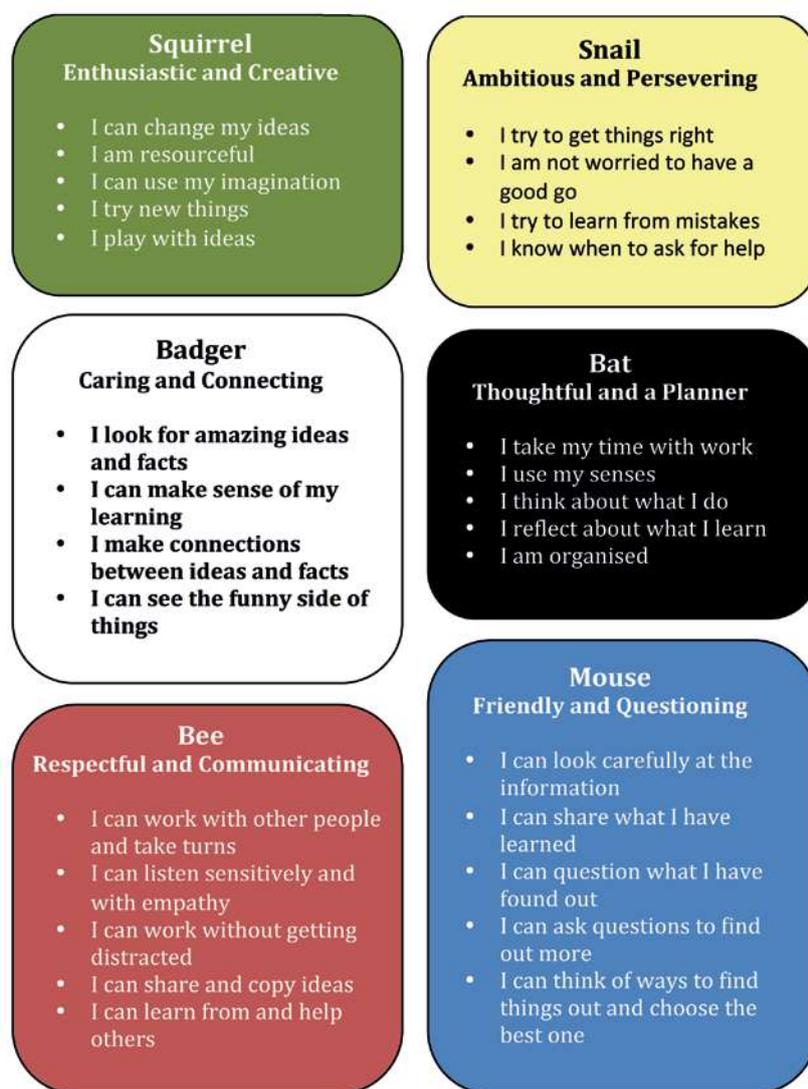


Figure 1

The children in one of the Year 2 classes (the Kingfishers) have now also created a set of poems for each of the animals, which were originally published in a book of poetry entitled 'Twice Upon a Slime'⁵, which followed the original 'Once Upon a Slime'⁶. These books of poetry are collections of poems written by our children and staff, inspired by the work we have done with our resident local poet, Roger Stevens.

<p>Badger</p> <p>Caring badger Amazing learner Brilliant thinker Fact finder Hole digger Worm cruncher Good hider Sense maker</p>	<p>Bat</p> <p>Perfect planner Confident thinker Organised worker Amazing reflector Insect catcher Cave dweller Nocturnal sleeper Amazing sensor</p>	<p>Bee</p> <p>Fantastic flyer Honey maker Turn taker Nice sharer Good listener Concentrating worker Respectful communicator</p>
<p>Mouse</p> <p>Best questioner Quick learner Great answer-sharer Cheese muncher House invader Information finder</p>	<p>Snail</p> <p>Persevering learner Ambitious trier Not a worrier Help asker Getting things right-er Working out-er Trail slime-er Cabbage eater</p>	<p>Squirrel</p> <p>Creative thinker Tree climber Mind maker Nut cruncher Great jumper Idea changer</p>

A curriculum full of JONK!

After four years of working towards a whole school approach to teaching and learning based on the 'The Joy of Not Knowing' model, we feel that we have managed to build an infrastructure and whole school philosophy that is helping us to equip the children with the foundations of how to feel successful as individuals (values), as learners (dimensions, animals) and as critical thinkers (De Bono's hats).

We are finding that when children begin to develop such positive dispositions and open mindsets towards the challenges that life and learning brings, they also begin to become wonderfully receptive to the learning opportunities that are offered to them. They then engage in these with enormous enthusiasm, passion and enjoyment.

The challenge that this then leaves us with, as practitioners, is centred around our ability to deliver the curriculum and the learning in a way that sustains the engagement of all learners. From a headteacher's point of view, it has been incredibly rewarding to see the JONK culture develop and grow throughout the school. Our weekly certificate assemblies are now all based on rewarding children's efforts and success in either a value or a learning dimension, and I was thrilled last year when our end-of-year celebration assemblies recognised the achievements of every student by using the values and dimensions to describe what was special about each child.

However, enjoying not knowing has to be taught, and teaching the whole curriculum through the JONK approach requires specific time to be set aside. We now devote the first week of every academic year to what we call a 'Learning to Learn Week' during which we equip the children with all the tools they need to access their learning throughout the year and make them feel successful as individuals and as learners.

In the next issue of Creative Teaching and Learning, I will explain how we structure our Learning to Learn Week, detailing the rest of the tools and strategies we use to drive our teaching and learning process and the delivery of the curriculum.

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The story of the snail

Near the Hertford Tree there lived a family of snails. Every day, they followed their slippery trails to the vegetable patch to munch through the tasty spinach and chard that the children had planted especially for them. And every evening, they followed the same trail back to their safe spots under the bark, roots and other crevices. Very occasionally, snails perished when a bird snatched one for its lunch or when a human stepped on one by accident. But in general, a snail's life was a good life.



There was one snail, however, who was not happy. He was not unhappy either – he just thought there ought to be more to life. When he told the other snails how he felt, they laughed at him and told him to enjoy what he had. If he was bored, he should just try some other leaves.

But Snail didn't stop dreaming. While he was trying some dandelion leaves, he suddenly knew what he really wanted to achieve in his life. He wanted to go to faraway places, see new things and then come back to tell all the snails about it.

As he thought these thoughts, he looked up and saw the Hertford Tree bathed in beautiful sunlight and then he knew. He was going to try to be the first snail ever to climb to the top of the Hertford Tree. When he told the other snails about his plans though, they just laughed. They told him he would mostly likely fall out of the tree or get eaten by the birds that lived there.

This made Snail even more determined to climb the tree. He would prove to them that there was more to life if you were just willing to have a go. So he wasted no more time and set off in the direction of the tree. Snail raced up the tree trunk but after only five minutes he was out of breath, and when he reached the first bump he was so careless that he fell down.

'Oh' thought Snail, 'If I am to get to the top, I must take more care.'

This time Snail made his way slowly up the trunk. After half an hour, he was already two meters up in the tree. He looked down and felt very excited about what he had achieved. He then looked up and suddenly started to worry. The top of the tree seemed so far away and he was only a little snail.

'You know what,' he said to himself. 'If I don't try, I will have to be satisfied with a life that is just about eating leaves. I think I would rather take a risk and try to fulfil my dream'.



He suddenly spotted a large grey animal running across the branches above him. Snail felt scared. What if that was a bird? Maybe the other snails were right. The tree was no place for a snail. He was never going to make it to the top. The grey creature made it seem so easy though.

'Hello,' he called. 'Are you a bird? Would you like to eat me?' The grey creature came closer, surprised to be spoken to by a snail.

'No, I am a squirrel and I like to eat nuts.'

'In that case,' said the

snail. 'Can you tell me how to get to the top of the tree?'

'I can give you a lift up to my dray,' said Squirrel. Snail was very pleased with this offer as he was quite tired. He glided onto Squirrel's back.

Soon Squirrel arrived at the dray. Wow, what an amazing journey – Snail had never travelled so fast! He couldn't wait to tell the other snails.

He stopped to munch on some more leaves before carrying on his journey. It was much harder now – the branches were thinner and more flexible. He felt a bit nauseated. Then he made the mistake of looking down. Now he felt even more sick!

'How am I ever going to get to the top,' he thought anxiously. 'And how will I ever get down?' He took a deep breath. 'You know what,' he thought. 'It has been great so far and I am not about to give up. If I keep trying, I will get there... I just must make sure not to look down!'

On a branch nearby, he suddenly noticed a bird, a song thrush, looking at him.

'I could eat you,' Song Thrush said. 'If I wasn't full up already. What are you doing so high up in the tree?' Snail told her all about his dream.

'I will get to the top,' he said. 'But I'd like to get a lift back down... I don't suppose you could give me lift back down?' Snail could just imagine the look on the other snails' faces when he arrived back being carried by a bird!

'I have never met such an ambitious snail,' chirped Song Thrush. 'I will give you a lift back down. Call me when you are ready.'

Snail continued on his journey and slowly, he got closer and closer. He didn't waste any more time looking down or around but kept his eye on his ultimate goal...the very top leaf of the tree. And when he finally got there, he felt like he truly had reached the top of the world. He could see so far around him. He watched the sunrays touch an amazing puddle of water on the other side of the playground, and all around him there were plants to be discovered and walls to be climbed. He felt overjoyed with this new understanding of what the world was like.

Eventually though, he felt ready to start his return journey and he called for Song Thrush. She gently picked him up in her beak – she had lots of experience picking up snails after all! – then she flew up, circling the tree at first, but then diving down at an amazing speed.

'Wow,' thought snail. 'I am the luckiest snail alive!' The other snail watched in amazement as the bird gently placed Snail down and took off again.

From that day onwards, snails started to become more adventurous. And Snail, well he had plenty more dreams that he followed, but on his next adventures, he didn't have to travel alone!



Knowledge trails

1) Thinking skills approach

to our days – Marcelo Staricoff and Alan Rees detail some innovative strategies for focusing the minds of their students and inspiring them to think and learn. library.teachingtimes.com/articles/thinkingskillstourdays

References

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4. de Bono, E (1985) Six Thinking Hats: An Essential Approach to Business Management. Little, Brown, & Company. ISBN 0-316-17791-1 (hardback) and 0316178314 (paperback).
5. Hertford Infant and Nursery School (2012) Once a Pond of Slime, Poems by and for Under 5s, Ed. Alison Bartlett and Robb Johnson.
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