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CLEAN  
LANGUAGE  
in the  
CLASSROOM



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# Introduction

Learning is a private problem-solving process, the student's problem being to create a personal understanding of the skills and knowledge to be learned.

Geoff Petty, *Teaching Today* (2009)

A speaker describes aspects of his spacecraft model while the group ask enquiring questions to elicit more detailed information about it from him. They formulate their questions carefully and wait for opportune moments to ask them. All the while they are listening to the questions of the others as well as to the answers. The group members notice, for each question, whether or not it's effective in unearthing more information about the model.

Some group members offer feedback to fellow questioners, coaching them to improve their performance. The speaker offers feedback too, so that individuals know whether their question has challenged and opened up his thinking. The group discover more about the model *and* more about effective questioning – honing their skills in a collaborative effort.

When questions lead the speaker to 'yes' or 'no' answers, the speaker says so. The speaker then offers the questioner an opportunity to rephrase their question so it encourages further exploration. If the questioner can't devise a more open question, group members offer suggestions.

The atmosphere is comfortable and supportive. No one is subdued or anxious about making unsuccessful attempts at questioning. They know their courage to have a go is held in high esteem by the group. The group ensures that everybody has the opportunity to contribute, taking account of individual interests and comfort levels.

As I sit across the room, apart from them, watching and learning, a question pops into my head and I ask it. The speaker, supported by a couple of others in the group, coaches me to improve the delivery of my question,

which becomes more open and effective as a result. When I deliver the new 'improved' version, the speaker offers me the thumbs-up and some verbal feedback before he answers it, 'Good question. It really made me think!'

This is clearly a collaborative learning group. Individuals support each other to develop skills and, in doing so, become more skilful themselves as questioners and as teachers and coaches of *questioning*. I notice they are beginning to distinguish *levels* of thinking, listening and questioning. For example, they are developing hierarchies:

When you ask about the cat's tail you get more detail about the tail, but when you ask about the cat itself you have to think about the whole cat species and think what kind of cat. You may have to think about the whole animal kingdom!

They contribute to debates about particular questions – take the question, 'And is there anything else?' for example:

It's a closed question because you can just say 'no' or 'yes' but it still really makes you think, doesn't it? So it's open because it makes you think ... it opens your brain.

They're excited by these conundrums. They muse about questions, their effects and their functions.

These people are 5, 6 and 7-year-old children in a mixed-age infant classroom. They had been using Clean Language for a year and were able to reflect on thinking, listening and questioning with aplomb. They had developed a high level of respect for each other's views and were able to conduct collaborative learning activities independently, interacting confidently with the adults in class as fellow members of the learning team.

A visiting initial teacher training tutor, impressed by the way the children were able to grapple with ideas, observed: 'It's very easy indeed to forget that these are Year 1 and Year 2 children, as their thinking and articulation of it are at the level of older (junior) children ... and that doesn't happen by accident!'

I stumbled upon Clean Language in 2004 and could see potential for an approach, in education, that enables people to lay their thinking out clearly so they can examine it, work with it and share it with others. I could see the potential for myself as a teacher to understand more about my own thinking and learning processes, and those of others, and for my pupils to be able to examine their thinking and learning and their own strategies. We already aimed to do this in schools and a clean approach offered a way to do it more effectively.

Teachers work hard to develop independent and collaborative learning environments and know well the benefits for children. A clean approach can amplify these benefits. On the face of it clean questions are just questions – and simple ones at that – but this belies the depth of thinking and reflection your pupils will experience when you use them.

## What is Clean Language?

Clean Language is a communication process developed by counselling psychologist David Grove in the 1980s and distilled into a model known as Symbolic Modelling by James Lawley and Penny Tompkins in the mid-1990s (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Clean Language is founded on listening and a particular kind of questioning, which uses 'clean questions', formed by taking a person's own words and blending them with a question which has been designed to be as free as possible from assumptions about what the answer might be.

**Clean Language is ...**

- A set of questions and a particular way of asking them, which directs attention without confining it, limiting it or leading it.
- An extremely receptive way of listening, which remains (as far as possible) free from assumptions, suppositions, presuppositions, opinions and judgements.

**Clean Language helps ...**

- Teachers facilitate children to think, without interfering with their thinking.
- Children to become more aware of what they think and how they think.
- Children learn to think.

**Clean Language promotes ...**

- Cognitive and emotional development.
- Raised awareness.
- An appreciation of diversity.
- Respect for self and others.
- Self-efficacy.

**Clean Language supports teachers as facilitators of learning**

Facilitating is not about transmitting content. Content is developed through the reflections and actions of learner(s), while learning facilitators influence to establish the climates conducive to this learning.

If you are going to use Clean Language to its best potential for you and for the children you teach, in addition to learning *how to use it*, you will need to develop an appreciation of *why to use it* and to consider the *contexts in which to use it* for maximum impact. The stories, transcripts, information and exercises that follow will help you, as will reflecting on your practice as a facilitator and reflecting from the perspective of a receiver of facilitation.

## The questions

You are probably curious to know what the questions are. A list of the most commonly used questions appears below. The first four questions tend to be used most often. These form the focus of the seven week journey (see Chapter 2), so you will be equipped with a strong foundation, right from the start.

The bracketed ellipses (...) denote a person's exact words, so their actual words will need to be inserted here when you ask one of the questions.

1. ... and is there anything else about (...)?
2. ... and what kind of (...)?
3. ... and where/whereabouts is (...)?
4. ... and what happens next?
5. ... and then what happens?
6. ... and what happens just before?
7. ... and where does/could (...) come from?
8. ... and that's (...) like what?
9. ... and is there a relationship between (...) and (...)?
10. ... and when (...), what happens to (...)?
11. ... and what would (...) like to have happen?
12. ... and what needs to happen for (desired outcome)?
13. ... and can (...) happen?

There are around 25 additional questions suited to specific contexts which are used much less often and are beyond the scope of this introductory book.

## Where can you use a clean approach?

In classes we've called Clean Language questions detail detective questions (DDQs for short), because when the children first began to use them they soon recognised that the questions elicit more detail in whatever context they are used: from observations of a simple leaf, to pondering experimental design, to a maths calculation, to a philosophical insight, to a social, emotional or behavioural issue.

Clean Language can be used effectively in a broad range of contexts and a clean approach can infuse your classroom with a learning buzz. The following examples will give you an idea of its scope.

Kathy would avoid work tasks using a range of avoidance tactics with her teaching assistant. One day she said she had a tummy ache just as they were about to begin the task. The teaching assistant, starting to tire of Kathy's resistance to work, asked me to intervene. Clean questions revealed that she had a pain, right in the middle of her body, that came when she missed her mummy, and what needed to happen was for her to spend some time each evening with her mummy before she went to bed. What needed to happen for that to happen? To telephone and tell her mummy. I telephoned mum and relayed what Kathy had described. Mum had been busy for a while now but had pressed on with her project, despite feeling guilty about it. That evening she spent 20 minutes reading with Kathy before bed. They scheduled short enjoyable 'together times' every evening. Kathy's tummy aches stopped, her spirits lifted and her work rate improved. You can see that without the questions we would have probably acted on our own mistaken assumptions – and the problem would no doubt have got worse instead of better.

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Jim's handwriting was uncontrolled and unreadable. The harder he tried, the shakier his handwriting became. He worked away at fine motor control activities, which were designed to help him, but matters just got worse. Control and fluency in handwriting needn't be just about the hands, of course. One day I asked Jim if he knew any good hand-writers. He said that he did. I asked him to think of each one in turn to get a sense of what it's like to *be* a good hand-writer. With the aid of a few clean questions, Jim identified some common attributes and demonstrated them by answering in actions rather than words. I could see that, for Jim, good hand-writers have a confident, relaxed state, which shows in the way they walk. I asked him to show me how a good hand-writer walks. Jim walked around the room with a kind of cool half strut, half swagger. He practised, taking a few circuits of the room to get into the groove of the 'good hand-writer' walk. Incredible as it seems, within 10 minutes he sat with a flourish and wrote like a good hand-writer. The improvement in his writing was stunning.

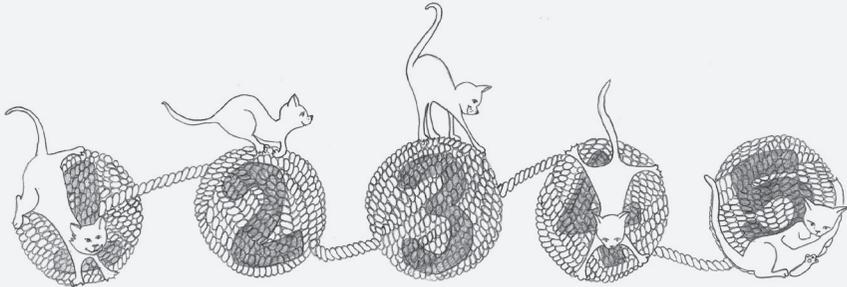
John was frequently frustrated. He jumped around the classroom and was often in trouble. Behaviour management helped to lessen the disruption and frustration but it was still a problem, both to him and the rest of the class. When the class modelled 'what we're like when we're learning at our best' he shared how he's like a frog who has to jump from lily pad to lily pad to connect with the learning. When the rest of the class became aware of his needs, they were able to accommodate the jumping around and asked for him to do it in a corner of the class, out of their way. He cooperated with the request and began to jump without disturbing his classmates. The frustration was relieved and the behaviour became manageable.

A class of 5, 6 and 7-year-olds planned, practised and performed a Christmas play for their parents without any content input from me (or any other adults). Clean facilitation helped them to focus on what they wanted to have happen, what needed to happen in each practice session, what happened in each rehearsal, what had just happened (as they reflected on rehearsals) and what needed to happen next to improve performance. The children planned and produced all the scenery and props as well. It was clear that they were organised and on the ball throughout, and they gave a confident, flexible and polished performance. During the rehearsals I didn't have to tell a single child to sit still and be quiet or to pay attention – not once (see Chapter 21 for more on this)!

A 'low-ability' maths set of 7-year-olds were struggling with mental calculations. They were practising using a mental number line. They'd had plenty of experience using physical, written and mental number lines during the three years they had been in school but most were still finding it difficult. I asked the few who were working confidently if they would be happy to share their thinking, so we could all know how they were doing it. I asked Clean Language questions to elicit their thinking processes.

What a surprise! Instead of conventional straight, left-to-right lines (e.g. 0 \_\_\_\_ 10), they were picturing number lines in much more creative and diverse ways. One child pictured a vertical ladder about 50 cm in front of his face with zero being the bottom rung and the other rungs representing numbers appropriate to the task (e.g. 1, 2, 3 or 5, 10, 15 or 10, 20, 30 and so on). Another child sensed not a number *line* but a series of numbers arranged, as if emerging from his tummy, in a curved, horn-like shape – the higher the number, the larger its size and the higher its location. A third child imagined a line like a long, straight strand of wool with woollen-ball numbers. She imagined a small fluffy kitten pouncing from number to number as she counted forwards or backwards, as though it were pouncing on a ball of wool. As she described it our hearts melted (it's the cutest maths strategy I've ever come across!).

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Those who were working less successfully shared their strategies too. Many of them pictured their mental number line running from right to left and were putting all their attention on trying to force it to turn around to match my left-to-right example, rather than using theirs to derive the answer. The children spent some time having a go at each other's strategies, as if they were their own, and discussed which worked well for them and why, and which didn't. Individuals then chose to take on the strategy that was most effective for them (I took on the bouncy kitten). Following this session their mental work became noticeably faster and more accurate, and their confidence and enthusiasm for mental work increased. In addition to any maths gains, these children had become more experienced at thinking about thinking through working metacognitively like this – a benefit for their learning in any subject area.



## Why use a clean approach?

Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica (2009) show us the value of nurturing people's innate nature and Carol Dweck (2007) promotes the application of effort to achieve success. Essentially this book is about neither and it's about both. It's about *emerging* innate nature and how you can facilitate that.

Clean Language can help your students to find out more about who they are and how they can be at their best and to experience the intrinsic motivation and curiosity that this naturally ignites. It helps get to the nitty-gritty to reveal what they know – because minds and bodies hold more information than you might at first imagine and Clean Language encourages that information to emerge.

Human beings are complex systems operating within complex contexts within their environment. Rarely will one discrete cause have a simple and predictable effect. Everything depends – there are so many variables. If I ask John to settle to his work, his response will depend on the nature of the work, the level of his understanding, the quality of our relationship, who is sitting next to him, his parents' attitudes to this kind of work and to school, whether he had a late night last night, whether he has eaten lunch, whether he is hungry or thirsty, what is happening in the classroom around him, what happened just before, what he thinks is going to happen next, the noise level in the classroom, the temperature in the classroom, the space he has for his elbows, his current interests and a whole host of other things.

In teaching, we spend time and attention trying to adapt material to the individuals in our charge. There is a current focus on personalised learning, where children engage with lesson objectives, devise success criteria and monitor their own progress towards outcomes. Children actively and collaboratively assess their work and make improvements as they go. We ask them to share their strategies with each other and contribute to the class learning community.

We promote pupil voice in a variety of ways – by encouraging personal choice and decision-making in class, by supporting children's representation



## Using modelling and questioning techniques, Clean Language seeks to improve communication and metacognition in the classroom.

It explores the metaphors that we use and think with, unlocking new levels of understanding. It helps both teachers and learners think about their own thinking and learning, creating deep learning experiences for each child.

Julie McCracken shows teachers how to use Clean Language in their classrooms, including detailed step-by-step instructions, effective questioning and modelling techniques, and case studies.

**The benefits of the clean approach include: improved communication; improved attainment; a supportive, collaborative classroom culture; and independent, reflective learners.**

A practical and methodological guide to a pedagogical approach which is capable of producing incredible outcomes; not just academically, but in terms of the development of the whole child.

**Helen Mulley, editor, *Teach Secondary***

This book could – and should – transform the face of education.

**Lynne Cooper, coach, facilitator and trainer, co-author of *The Five-Minute Coach***

This book is concerned with schools; even so, its contents have the potential to inspire and be applied by educators at all levels.

**Dr Paul Tosey, independent consultant, Honorary Visiting Fellow, Surrey Business School, University of Surrey**

This book will be a great resource for all parents, as well as for educators working with children of any age.

**Judy Rees, Clean Language coach, facilitator and trainer, co-author of *Clean Language: Revealing Metaphors and Opening Minds***

An outstanding guide for teachers who want to use questioning strategies.

**Richard Churches, Principal Adviser for Research and Evidence Based Practice, Education Development Trust**

We highly recommend this book, not only for teachers but for all educators.

**James Lawley and Penny Tompkins, authors of *Metaphors in Mind***

Julie McCracken proves that a careful, subtle and humane approach to understanding what is going on in children's heads is not only possible but highly desirable.

**Ian Gilbert, founder, Independent Thinking**

This is the book for you if you are passionate about transforming the thinking, learning and socialisation of the children you teach, so that they can be their best selves.

**Wendy Sullivan, Clean Change Company, co-author of *Clean Language: Revealing Metaphors and Opening Minds***



**Julie McCracken** is a primary school teacher whose passion for children and effective learning has led her to become a certified Clean Language facilitator and NLP Master Practitioner in addition to her busy day job. She believes in the simple but essential solutions this training provides in allowing her to ensure that her students are part of an inclusive, interactive and happy learning environment.

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