Preparing to Use
the Lesson Ideas

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This book shares a range of excellent lesson ideas to help you guide your students through the Learning Pit. Here you will find guidance for setting up and running lessons around topics as thought-provoking as exploration, language, fairness, time and friendship. Each lesson has a set of resources to use with your students as well as recommended activities to make progress from first thoughts to deep **understanding**.

To make the most of each lesson idea in this book, we recommend that you also read the following books.

The Learning Challenge

The Learning Challenge (Nottingham, 2017) describes the theory and practice of guiding students through the 'Learning Pit'. It covers everything from background to rationale, from establishing a learning culture to techniques for challenging, motivating and guiding students from surface level **knowledge** to deeper understanding. It shows how contradictions and uncertainties can be used to think more deeply, and how being 'in the pit' makes learning more rigorous and engaging.

Challenging Learning Through Dialogue

Challenging Learning Through Dialogue (Nottingham, Nottingham and Renton, 2017) shares some of the best strategies for using **dialogue** to enhance learning. It includes examples of the strategies used in the lessons within this book and Philosophy for Children (P4C) techniques to help students learn how to think, how to be reasonable, how to make moral decisions, and how to understand another person's point of view.

These two books will give you a deeper insight into how to use the lesson ideas in this book more effectively. The main sections to read before trying out any of the lesson ideas in this book include the following.

The Learning Challenge

An introduction to the Learning Challenge: Chapter 1

1. Values and ground rules for engaging students: Sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.4

2. Identifying concepts: Sections 4.2, 4.2.1 and 4.3

3. Creating and selecting questions: Sections 4.4 and 4.5

4. Generating cognitive conflict: Chapter 5

5. Constructing answers and the **'eureka'** moment: Sections 6.1, 6.4 and 6.5

6. Reviewing and **metacognition** techniques: Sections 7.1 and 7.2

The difference between dialogue and **discussion**: Sections 2.0 and 2.6

1. Creating the right environment for dialogue: Sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3

2. Using dialogue to develop reasoning and reasonableness: Chapter 4

3. Groupings and ground rules: Chapter 5

4. Opinion Lines and Corners: Sections 7.2 and 7.3

5. How to run a Mystery: Sections 8.1, 8.2, 8.4 and 8.6

6. Philosophy for Children: Sections 11.1, 11.2 and 11.4

Once you have read these sections, you will be in a much better position to make the most of the lesson ideas in this book. For now, though, here are some brief notes to get you started.

1.1 THE LEARNING CHALLENGE

James Nottingham created the Learning Challenge in 2003 as a way to help his students think and talk about learning. It is rather like a child-friendly representation of Vygotsky's **Zone of Proximal Development** (1978) in that it describes the move from actual to potential understanding. Since its inception, the Learning Challenge has captured the imagination of educators, students and their parents. It has featured in many periodicals, articles and books, and it now appears on classroom walls around the world.

The Learning Challenge promotes challenge, dialogue and a growth mindset. It offers participants the opportunity to think and talk about their own learning. It encourages a depth of **enquiry** that moves learners from surface-level knowledge to deep understanding. It encourages an exploration of causation and impact; an interpretation and comparison of meaning; a classification and sequencing of detail; and a recognition and analysis of pattern. It builds learners' resilience, determination and curiosity. And it nurtures a love of learning.

At the heart of the Learning Challenge is 'the **pit**'. A person could be said to be 'in the pit' when they are in a state of **cognitive conflict** – that is to say, when a person has two or more ideas that make sense to them, but when compared side by side they appear to be in conflict with each other. Each of the lesson plans in this book are designed to create that exact situation, so that your students need to think more deeply about the topic.

Examples of the sort of cognitive conflicts you will find in this book include:

- We are all responsible for our own actions, and yet sometimes we act because we are following orders or instructions from others (Lesson 1: Who was responsible for the death of William in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*?).

- Monstrous people are born that way, but monstrous people develop in response to the conditions around them (Lesson 4: Was Heathcliff a monster?).

- Love is impossible to define and yet everyone knows what love is (Lesson 11: Is Romeo really in love?).

- We are free to make choices, but our choices are influenced (Lesson 16: Does the poem 'The Road Not Taken' show us how to make the right choice?).

- Happiness is a choice, but happiness is also a spontaneous response to events (Lesson 18: Did Anne Frank experience happiness?).

- A great speech can only persuade us of something we want to believe, but perhaps a great speech can make us think we want to believe something (Lesson 19: Why was Winston Churchill's speech effective?).
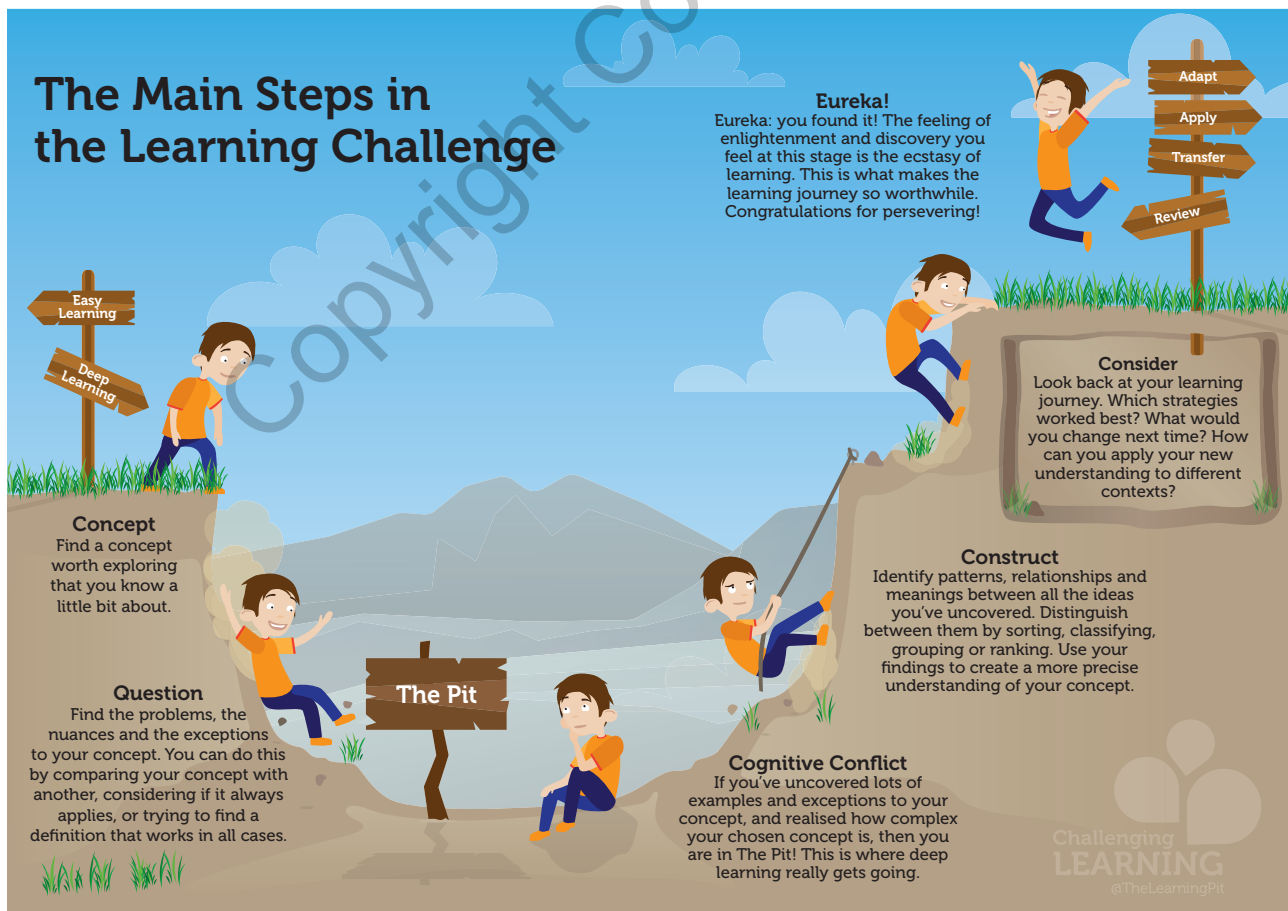
When your students think through these or other examples of cognitive conflict, then they will find themselves 'in the pit'.

It is important to note that learners are *not* in the pit when they have *no* idea. The pit represents moving beyond a single, basic idea into the situation of having multiple ideas that are as yet unsorted. This happens when a learner purposefully explores inconsistencies, exceptions and contradictions in their own or others' thinking so as to discover a richer, more complex understanding. That is why each of the lesson ideas aims to move participants out of their comfort zone. This is a deliberate and strategic objective. It is neither incidental nor casual. It is not something that happens parenthetically. The very purpose of the lessons is to get your students into the pit (and back out again)!

Timing and Pacing

To achieve this, we recommend that you use the four steps of the Learning Challenge. You don't have to include all of these steps in just one lesson, and, indeed, you may not be able to because of time. We have included recommendations for each stage, but we have not said how you might time each step because this would depend on a number of variables, such as the needs of your students, their prior learning and your context or

▶ **Figure 1.1: The Learning Challenge**

The Main Steps in the Learning Challenge

Easy Learning
Deep Learning

Concept
Find a concept worth exploring that you know a little bit about.

Question
Find the problems, the nuances and the exceptions to your concept. You can do this by comparing your concept with another, considering if it always applies, or trying to find a definition that works in all cases.

The Pit

Cognitive Conflict
If you've uncovered lots of examples and exceptions to your concept, and realised how complex your chosen concept is, then you are in The Pit! This is where deep learning really gets going.

Eureka!
Eureka: you found it! The feeling of enlightenment and discovery you feel at this stage is the ecstasy of learning. This is what makes the learning journey so worthwhile. Congratulations for persevering!

Adapt
Apply
Transfer
Review

Consider
Look back at your learning journey. Which strategies worked best? What would you change next time? How can you apply your new understanding to different contexts?

Construct
Identify patterns, relationships and meanings between all the ideas you've uncovered. Distinguish between them by sorting, classifying, grouping or ranking. Use your findings to create a more precise understanding of your concept.

setting. For example, you might wish to set the scene and cover stage 1 before the lesson and you might like to invite your students to complete stage 4 at a later date – perhaps for homework or within informal small-group extension activities. You might find that you need (or want) to spend longer exploring the **concept** and creating cognitive conflict around that concept through extending the questioning and developing the dialogue that stems from that questioning. It really is up to you! Nothing is set in stone – which is why we have put them forward as lesson 'ideas' rather than lesson 'plans'.

The four steps of the Learning Challenge are as follows.

Stage 1: Concept

The lesson activities begin by familiarising your students with the underlying concepts. It is not necessary for all participants to understand all the concepts. So long as *some* of your students have *some* understanding of one or more of the concepts then the lesson activities should work well.

Stage 2: Conflict

The next stage is to create some cognitive conflict around one or more of the concepts. The recommended questions associated with each lesson plan should help you achieve this, as should the structured activities. Remember that the key to the Learning Challenge is to get your students 'into the pit' by creating cognitive conflict in their minds. This deliberate creation of a dilemma is what makes the Learning Challenge such a good model for challenge and enquiry, reasoning and reasonableness, and is precisely what each of the lesson ideas is designed to achieve.

Stage 3: Construct

After exploring the concepts for a while (and we're being purposefully ambiguous by saying 'for a while' because it depends on context) your students will begin to make links and **construct** meaning. They will do this by examining options, connecting ideas together and explaining cause and effect. Often (though not always) this leads them to a sense of 'eureka' in which they find new clarity. Each lesson idea includes some recommended activities to help them reach this eureka moment by 'climbing out of the pit'.

Stage 4: Consider

After achieving a sense of **eureka,** your students should reflect on their learning journey. They can do this by considering *how* they progressed from simplistic ideas (stage 1), to the identification of more complex and conflicting ideas (stage 2), through to a deeper understanding of how all these ideas interrelate to each other (stage 3). Now at stage 4, they can think about the best ways to relate and apply their new understanding to different contexts.
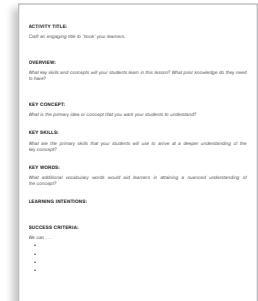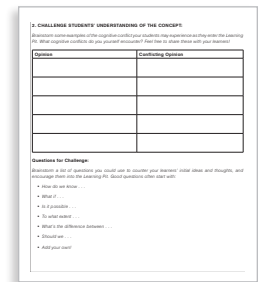
Lesson Ideas Format

In Chapter 2, you'll find a description of the lesson activities that support the journey through the steps of the Learning Challenge. In Part II of this book, you'll find the Lesson Ideas. For clarity and consistency, the Lesson Ideas have been presented so that each one follows the same format and structure, using headings and sub-headings that are common to every lesson. This structure clearly highlights where you are in relation to the four key steps of the Learning Challenge. This common format is designed to enable you to readily and confidently work with your students on a range of different Learning Challenge lesson ideas.

Setting the Scene

ACTIVITY TITLE:
Craft an engaging title to 'hook' your learners.

OVERVIEW:
What key skills and concepts will your students learn in this lesson? What prior knowledge do they need to have?

KEY CONCEPT:
What is the primary idea or concept that you want your students to understand?

KEY SKILLS:
What are the primary skills that your students will use to arrive at a deeper understanding of the key concept?

KEY WORDS:
What additional vocabulary words would aid learners in attaining a nuanced understanding of the concept?

LEARNING INTENTIONS:

SUCCESS CRITERIA:
We can . . .
-
-
-
-

STRATEGIES USED:
Choose 1-3 of the Learning Challenge strategies listed in Chapter 2 that you can use throughout your lesson.

1. IDENTIFY IMPORTANT CONCEPTS:
What additional concepts are related to your key concepts? What other angles or avenues might your learners explore as they develop a deeper understanding of the key concept?

[OPTIONAL] ACTIVITY 1:
Outline the first activity in your lesson, using one of the strategies you chose above. This activity should provoke discussion and elicit students' initial ideas about the key concept.

As you become more familiar and well-practised at using this structure, you may wish to develop your own ideas – or modify some of the Lesson Ideas we have provided. To enable you to do this, we have included a blank lesson structure master (like the one shown in Figure 1.2) for you to download. This is available on the companion website: http://resources.corwin.com/learningchallengelessons.

1.2 LEARNING INTENTIONS

The intended outcomes of the lesson ideas in this book are to help your students develop the following personal habits, abilities and attitudes:

1. An enquiring outlook coupled with an ability to articulate problems

2. A tendency to be intellectually proactive and persistent

3. A capacity for imaginative and adventurous thinking

4. A habit of exploring alternative possibilities

5. An ability to critically examine issues

6. A capacity for sound independent judgement

The lesson ideas also aim to help your students develop social habits and dispositions such as:

1. Actively listening to others and trying to understand their viewpoints

2. Giving reasons for what you say and expecting the same of others

3. Exploring disagreements reasonably

4. Being generally cooperative and constructive

5. Being socially communicative and inclusive

6. Taking other people's feelings and concerns into account

Each of these can be achieved through the type of high-quality dialogue that the lesson ideas in this book are intended to generate.

1.3 HIGH-QUALITY DIALOGUE

The lesson ideas in this book rely on the use of high-quality dialogue.

Dialogue is of high quality when it:

1. challenges ideas, reasons and assumptions;

2. makes participants **'wobble'**;

3. leads to deeper thinking; and

4. encourages participants to co-construct meaning together.

In the most basic sense, dialogue is the to and fro of talk between people who want to be understood. However, dialogue is not just 'conversation'. Whereas a conversation might go nowhere (or indeed anywhere), a dialogue properly defined and conducted always goes *somewhere* (for example, answering or examining a key question that was identified in the early stages of the dialogue).

Dialogue isn't just something that happens *between* people, it also takes place *within* people, in that thinking is rather like an inner dialogue. At least some forms of thinking are. Perhaps not the subconscious, automatic type of thinking, but certainly the reflective, ponderous form of thinking can be said to be an internal dialogue. This makes dialogue all the more important. If the patterns of talk established in communication with others influence our patterns of internal dialogue, then dialogue leads to thinking itself.

Dialogue is not the **Initiation–Response–Evaluation (IRE)** model of questioning that is used in many classrooms. IRE is a teacher-led, three-part sequence that begins with the teacher asking a student a question or introducing a topic for the purpose of finding out whether the student knows an answer. Although this style of questioning does have some place in education, it is only really a way of checking students' factual recall. It tends not to be very productive in terms of higher-order thinking, nor particularly useful for dialogue. Even if a higher-order question is posed, generally only one student gets to answer the question before the teacher evaluates the answer and ends any form of discussion.

Dialogue is not debate. Though many people use the term 'debate' when talking about dialogue, they are not one and the same thing. Debate is a type of classroom talk that, like IRE and conversation, has its purpose and benefits, but also its limitations. In debate, the situation is typically set up to create polarised views – usually a 'for' and 'against' group, with participants encouraged to express opinions that support only their side of the argument.

Debate encourages students to give reasons, to talk for an extended period, to participate and to use the language of persuasion. However, the main purpose of debate

Challenging LEARNING

Setting the Scene

is to win the battle and persuade others to agree with a particular view. This means that students may not listen properly to opposing points of view and instead just present their own perspective. There might also be less value placed on co-constructing new understandings or preparing counter-arguments, and more emphasis on preparing winning statements or assertions.

Dialogue is about working collaboratively to understand what has not yet been understood and to form reasoned judgements and inferences. The IRE structure is compatible with dialogue, but it is not the same as dialogue. Dialogue can take participants further. It can help your students to become capable thinkers who are willing, able to learn and who can reason and express themselves clearly and confidently. At its best, dialogue will also foster encouragement, engagement, understanding and exploration.

Dialogue is a supremely flexible and stimulating instrument of thought. As children get older, the issues they need to understand, the judgements they need to make and the relationships they need to maintain become more complex. The turn-taking structure of dialogue that leads a child to learn the rudiments of language also serves as a means of thinking about complex issues. Thus, dialogue is holistic in its intentions and its outcomes.

Within high-quality dialogue, participants take actions (or make 'moves') that help to deepen thinking. In turn, this deeper thinking helps to develop an experiential understanding of the features listed in the concepts column of Figure 1.3.

▶ **Figure 1.3: Concepts and Actions in High-Quality Dialogue**

Type of Thinking	Dialogue 'Moves'	Concepts
Productive	Generating ideas, generating alternative ideas, listing	Alternative, list, collection, class, category
Collaborative	Listening, taking turns, suspending judgement, establishing and applying 'ground rules'	Community
Creating Meaning	Questioning, classifying, comparing, ranking, connecting, clarifying, exemplifying, offering analogies, interpreting, summarising, defining, elaborating	Same, different, principle, example, important, significant, special, ordinary, function, purpose, part, whole, multiple, single, complete, incomplete, class, category, all, some, none, many
Argumentation (Argumentation to be used as the pursuit of truth rather than simply 'arguing' as children might argue over a toy. All reasons and ideas should be considered in this process.)	Agreeing, disagreeing, making an argument, questioning assumptions, assessing evidence	Opinion, belief, proposition, conclusion, claim, reason, premise, argument, cause, effect, symptom, consequence, true or false, agree, disagree, doubt, class, category, all, some, none, many, assumption, evidence, criteria, proof, judgement, justify
Speculative	Hypothesising, predicting, imagining, offering thought experiments	Cause, effect, symptom, consequence, theory, hypothesis

1.4 EXPLORATORY TALK

One way to think about dialogue is as **exploratory talk**. Neil Mercer (2000) describes exploratory talk as:

> . . . that in which partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas. Relevant information is offered for joint consideration. Proposals may be challenged and counter-challenged but if so, reasons are given, and alternatives are offered. Agreement is sought as a basis for joint progress. Knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible in the talk. (Mercer, 2000: 16)

However, when Rupert Wegerif (2002) looked into the types of talk found in classrooms, he discovered very little exploratory talk occurs when students work together in groups. Instead, the less learning-focused types of talk predominate, with students leaning more towards **disputational** or **cumulative talk**.

Cumulative talk is characterised by repetitions, confirmations and elaborations. It is typically heard when friendship groups work together or when an unfamiliar group is getting to know each other. The talk is positive and affirming, making everyone feel included and welcome. The participants rarely criticise each other or the ideas being put forward. Not everyone in the group takes part, nor are they expected to. The group accepts first ideas and does not try to go beyond these. This leads to an accumulation of 'common knowledge' and a sense of 'harmony in the group'.

Cumulative talk might not seem such a bad thing because it tends to be friendly and collaborative. However, rarely does cumulative talk involve challenge or rethinking beyond the first idea. Very little critical or creative thinking is evident. Reasons tend to be vague and are generally intended to affirm rather than examine.

The opposite of cumulative talk is disputational talk. This type of talk is less prevalent and is actually quite hard to spot because it can occur 'under the radar'. It is much more negative than cumulative talk. Disputational talk is critical of individuals (and their ideas), focuses on differences, is competitive and is all about being seen to 'win'. Groups engaged in disputational talk do not work together, nor pool their resources/intellect. Individuals within the group dominate. Mistakes are criticised and perhaps even ridiculed.

To ensure that the lesson ideas in this book work as well as intended, it is important that you encourage (and teach) your students to use exploratory talk. Exploratory talk is characterised by longer exchanges, use of questions, **reflection**, explanation and speculation. It should make full use of critical thinking and should also be very creative.

To engage in exploratory talk, your students should explore ideas and offer reasons for their thinking; they should also expect to be challenged by other students. Any challenges they make should be accompanied by reasons so that the whole group can learn from the interaction. There should be no risk of losing face if they get it 'wrong' because all statements should be offered in the expectation of helping everyone to make progress. The connection between this type of talk and improved language **skills**, both in general

Challenging LEARNING

Setting the Scene

and in subject specific terms, should become apparent as your students process the information at their own level and then seek to go beyond it.

Exploratory talk occurs in an environment in which students feel comfortable to explore ideas with, and to trust in, each other. This means your students will need to recognise the benefits of collaborative learning and to know that when viewpoints are expressed, challenged or explored, it is always for the purpose of gaining new understanding and not for point-scoring or the belittling of others.

Making this a reality in the classroom requires some careful planning and preparation. An explicit set of ground-rules can help to provide the structure needed for exploratory talk to flourish. These could be as follows:

- We share our ideas and listen to each other.

- We talk one at a time.

- We respect each other's opinions.

- We give reasons to explain our ideas.

- If we disagree, we ask 'why?'

- We try to agree in the end if we can.

These rules are not set in stone! You do not have to use these rules. Indeed, it might be better to create a set of rules with your students. That way, they will have a sense of ownership and will be more likely to understand the meanings fully.

Whichever way you decide to go – presenting the list above or creating a new list with your students – you should ensure there is an opportunity for your students to talk about the meanings of the rules and to agree the precise wording of the rules.

Once this is complete, make sure the ground rules are displayed prominently for ease of reference and as a reminder. This might seem unnecessary. Yet, researchers have found that where there are a simple set of agreed ground rules that are constantly referred to, this has a far greater influence on improving the quality and focus of dialogues than if the rules are established and not frequently referred to. This is particularly true when students are working in smaller collaborative groups.

1.5 UNDERPINNING VALUES

There are many values and beliefs upon which the Learning Challenge lessons are based. Here are the most important ones.

Challenge Makes Learning More Interesting

At the heart of the Learning Challenge is the belief that challenge makes learning more stimulating and worthwhile. This is in contrast to making learning simpler and more elementary, which has its place but is not ideal much of the time.

To illustrate the point, please compare the two paths shown in Figure 1.4. As you will see, the path on the left is straightforward and is likely to get you to your destination quickly, whereas the path to the right is filled with obstacles and will require greater effort to reach your goal. Of course, if you were in a rush, then the obvious path to take is the one on the left.

But if we were to ask you to choose the path most *interesting,* then which one would you go for? Which one looks to be the more engaging and thought-provoking? Which one is

most likely to lead you into discussion with other people about the best strategies going forward? Which one are you most likely to look back on and review with enthusiasm? Which is going to give you the most satisfaction when you eventually reach your goal? And which route are you most likely to remember months, maybe even years from now because of the effort you had to put in to get through it?

Hopefully, you've answered 'the right path' to each of those questions. If not, then we've got a persuasion job on our hands as well as an instructional one!

All of the lesson ideas in this book are designed to encourage participants to take the more challenging 'path' so that they think more, engage with ideas and each other more, and develop strategies for making sense of the problems they are faced with.

We Are All Fallible

The Learning Challenge lessons encourage *all* participants, including the teacher or facilitator, to be open about their own fallibility and to willingly explore flaws in their own thinking so that everyone may learn more together. This means that phrases such as 'I'm not sure', 'perhaps', 'maybe' and 'I was wondering' are to be encouraged throughout the lessons. To some people, these sorts of phrases reveal ignorance or weak-mindedness. Yet in the context of the Learning Challenge, they are intended to reveal the ideals of open-mindedness and hypothesis-testing.

As Bertrand Russell wrote in an essay lamenting the rise of Nazism in 1933, 'The fundamental cause of the trouble is that in the modern world the stupid are cock-sure whilst the intelligent are full of doubt'. Or, as the celebrated Irish poet W.B. Yeats wrote in 'The Second Coming', 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity' (Yeats, 1996 [1919]).

When your students engage with the Learning Challenge lessons, remind them of the benefits of being open-minded and explorative.

Setting the Scene

Linked to these ideals is the notion that there might not be one, agreed 'right' answer at the end of it all. Although most of the time some form of agreement is attainable, there are occasions, particularly with the more open-ended, philosophical questions, when no satisfactory conclusion is achievable in the timeframe you have. But that is not to say the experience will be any less worthwhile. It is to say that process is just as important as product, as explored in the next value below.

Process Is As Important As Outcome

The process of learning is often more important than getting the right answer, particularly with Learning Challenge lessons. A learning focus includes an emphasis on questioning, challenging, striving to get better and on beating personal bests. This contrasts with a performance focus that hinges on grades, attainment, showing what you can do and on beating each other.

As numerous teachers and their students will testify, far too many schools focus primarily on performance ('it's the grades that count'). And yet improved performance comes from a learning focus, whereas learning does *not* always come from a performance focus.

If you and your students focus on *learning,* then their performance grades will also increase. However, if you and your students focus on grades alone, then rich learning opportunities might be missed along the way.

That is why *process* is more important than getting the answer right in Learning Challenge lessons. Of course, if you can get your students to deeply engage in learning *and* help them to reach a satisfactory answer, then that is ideal. But if your students go into the pit and don't come out (yet), then don't worry: it doesn't mean they haven't benefited from the experience, so long as you keep encouraging them to go beyond their first answers.

You want your students to seek alternative explanations, to ask questions such as *why*, *if* and *what about*, and to see problems as part of the learning process rather than things to be avoided. Encouraging students to make connections, find the significance of parts in relation to the whole and look for ways to transfer ideas to other contexts will *improve* their competence rather than them simply *proving* they have got the right answer.