

Breathing blue by Clapton duck pond

Caitlin Walker describes a project where 'at risk' teenagers were helped to move from hostility to curiosity, from opposition and antagonism to exploring the emotional aspects of living, via a mix of NLP and Clean Language

The task

To take 10 of the most disruptive Year 9 students, at risk of becoming offenders, from a failing school in Hackney, East London and persuade them to address their educational and behavioural needs – the longer-term aim being that they rejoin the mainstream education system and realise their potential.

How was I to help these kids? They attended school for perhaps one day in ten and disrupted every classroom they entered. Some were known to the police for violent, criminal behaviour. Would they even turn up after school?

One of the problems seems to be that everyone is telling these young people what they should do differently. When I go on a personal or professional development course and the trainer tells me I'm flawed and need fixing, I find myself disengaging pretty quickly. If I perceive that my current behaviours are being held in contempt by the trainer or the group, I deny them or get defensive about them, and I'm less inclined to explore, experiment or learn about new behaviours available to me.

So the important principles for me in engaging in personal professional development are:

- I trust the integrity of the trainers – they walk their talk
- the trainers demonstrate the skills they want me to develop
- the skills I already have are recognised and valued
- there is trust that there are solutions to any problems or limitations I'm experiencing, and I can find and sustain these solutions myself
- there is safety in the group that allows me to experiment with new behaviours.

Could I offer anything less to these young people? What if I simply set up a general personal development programme like the ones I ran for adults, and trusted that once the group started self-modelling, the solutions and development would simply emerge from the system? It was a risk. But I went ahead and designed the course on the lines of group modelling using Clean Questions, Accelerated Learning and Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP). I wanted them not only to have more self-awareness and self-control but

also to learn the skills I was using so that they would be less dependant on other people to help them keep developing in future.

Brain coach

I met them individually and introduced myself as a brain coach, offering to help them find out how their brains worked and how to use them more effectively. I invited them for three sessions and all 10 of them turned up.

My immediate need was for an initial topic they were skilled in and familiar with – an area that might get their attention and allow me to start the self-modelling process:

Right lads, let's start. Who here hit someone this week?

Me miss.

What you chatting about miss?

A've been in nuff trouble.

He did miss, he had a fight yesterday.

Ah haven't been in trouble for ages etc.

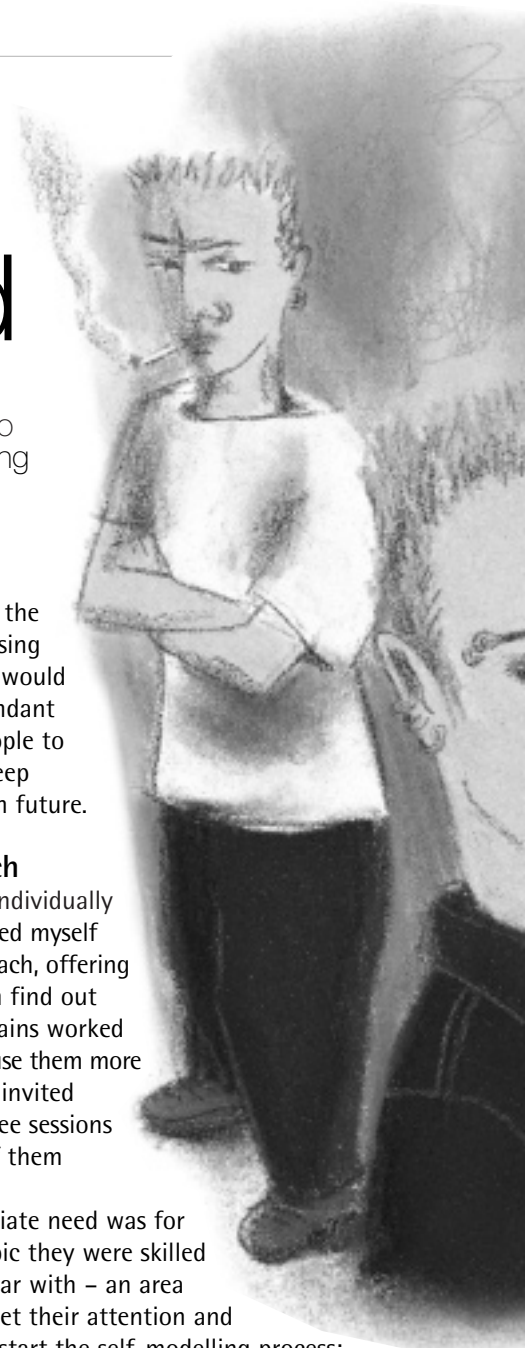
OK then, before you hit someone, how do you know it's going to happen? What happens just before you hit someone?

(Sam) I just switch [snaps fingers] miss.

(Danny) I go red.

(Ryan) Nah, ya don't go red, everything just goes quiet

Ok, so you switch [I snap fingers like him], you go red, everything just goes quiet. Who doesn't do that? (Zak) Me miss, I don't generally lose it, I get all [feet tap and shake] and I just get away before I explode. You get all [I point to feet] and get away before you explode. You go red, you switch [I snap fingers],





PHOTODISC

everything just goes quiet, and when it goes quiet what kind of quiet?

(Ryan) [Puts hands near ears with movement like old-fashioned horse blinkers] *Like shutters miss, it all goes quiet, like I can't hear anything in my head and it's like I can only see the one in front of me, like everything else shuts off and the next thing I know is people are shouting, someone's lying on the ground and I'm in trouble.*

That's what happens to him. What about you? You go red, and when you go red, what kind of red is it?

(Danny) *Blood red* [gestures vaguely towards chest]. *And blood red* [I point to his chest], *everything goes quiet for you, like shutters, you get all* [I point to feet] *and you switch* [I snap fingers] *and when switch* [I snap fingers], *is there anything else about switch?* [I snap fingers]

(Sam) *I'm fine, then someone just looks at me wrong and I switch* [snaps fingers near his left ear] *and I take them out.*

You're fine, then someone looks at you wrong and you switch [I snap fingers towards his left ear], *and as they look at you wrong, what kind of switch* [snap fingers towards his left ear] *is that?*

(Sam) *There's no choice, it just happens.*

We've got no choice here, blood red here [I point], *shutters here, and you get all...* [I point to his feet] *and get away before you explode.*

And when you get all... [I point to feet], *what happens just before you get away?*

(Zak) *I can feel it rising* [feet tap frantically and he gestures to his legs].

(Ryan) *I've seen him do that when he's vexed miss, his knees shake and he just goes, just walks off.*

(Zak) *Yeah but it takes a long time before I have to leave and I always leave before I explode.*

(Ryan) *True miss. He never gets in trouble for fighting.*

(Sam) *Is that why I get done for fighting miss, cause it happens so fast?* [boy who switches]

I don't know; let's find out a bit more and we can work it out. I'll ask you some questions to find out what happens before you get vexed or hit someone; see if we can get the steps before. Like slowing down a video until you've got each scene rather than a speeded-up fight sequence.

You know you go blood red [I gesture at his chest]? *Whereabouts is blood red?*

(Danny) *It just gets red and I get angry, like my blood's boiling* [gestures by top of chest with one hand as though something's rising and the hand is holding it down].

And like my blood's boiling, and when my blood's boiling, what happens just before it's blood red and boiling?

(Danny) *It's cooler!!* [said as though this is stating the bleeding obvious]

And when it's cooler, it's cooler like what?

(Danny) *It's* – [looks around and points to maroon on a poster on the wall] *like that, and it's here* [points an inch lower on his chest].

And it's [I point to maroon colour] *and it's here* [I point to lower on chest] *and when it's here, what happens before it's here?*

(Danny) *It's purple* [points to solar plexus].

And before it's purple, where is it before it's purple?

(Danny) *It's cool blue, like the sky, like my mum* [his whole physiology shifts, he looks –uncharacteristically – upwards and smiles a gentle, relaxed smile. No one mocks him.]

And cool blue, like the sky, like your mum, then purple here [I point to solar plexus], *then here* [I point to chest], *then blood red and then like your blood's boiling and then what happens after blood's boiling?*

(Danny) *I get raj* [enraged?] *and attack, then it's out of me and I run and look at the sky and think of my mum and breathe in blue until the red's gone.*

“

I needed a topic they were skilled in and familiar with – an area that might get their attention and allow me to start the self-modelling process

”

OK, so we've got one sequence here from start to finish, can you draw a story board of that sequence? I'd like each of you to notice if you lose your temper before next session, how early can you spot that it's happening, get the main sequences down and find out what happens after – how you get out of it. Then we'll do some more.

Next session

So who noticed what since last session?

(Danny) *You know I go red? Well yesterday I felt it happening. I get up in the morning blue and relaxed, then I see Dad's drunk, red [points to belly]. Then I have to put dirty clothes back on cos he hasn't done laundry, red! No money for bus, red! I'm cold and I'm late for school, red! I get to school and get detention and I'm red right here and anyone says anything it boils! Is that why I'm always going for people?*

I'm not sure, makes sense though.

(Danny) *So, I thought – what if I walk to school past the duck pond and I stop and look in the water, cause that makes me blue and if I breathe in blue and think of my Mum, I could get purple before I get to school and then I won't boil so fast. Do you think that will work miss? I don't know, try it this week and let us know. What about the rest of you?*

I was treating it casually but I was so excited. No way could I have worked out that breathing in blue by Clapton duck pond would be the anger management strategy that worked for this teenager. But it did work; the others built similar models of their own anger strategies and counter strategies and then they co-designed group rules that would help them to keep in a good state during our lessons, and emergency strategies for the best way to respond to each of them if they did lose it. The teenager in the first example was able, for the first time, to control himself long enough to build up friendships in the group and then in the school.

Applying the strategy

Once we'd got the anger stuff sorted we were able to build models of other things. One of the biggest, surliest of the lads came in sheepishly to a lesson, before we started.

(Jason) *Miss, don't say anything in front of them but can you do this for maths?*

What do you mean?

(Jason) *I can't add up. I just go blank. Can you use this to make your brain add up like a calculator?*

And we were off, with hardly any leading, no tugging or pulling or threatening or bribing; we covered reading, spelling, times tables, addition, thinking about time, setting goals and 'managing states'. Tony Blair visited and the teenagers explained how

their spelling strategies worked and how you could learn how you learn.

The group became adept modellers, able to build up models of any repeating patterns they or another teenager had, whether it was stammering or remembering lyrics, doing times tables or finding your way round town. I used Clean Questions (see below) to help them build up these mental models and they developed metaphor landscapes that helped to encapsulate their understanding and share it with others. Later they learned Clean Questions and before long they were detecting my patterns and coaching me.

We did come up against problems at times, usually because I tried to short cut my system and break my own rules. When I stood up to talk I needed silence. If they were more than five minutes late for a lesson without a really good reason, they didn't attend. Everyone's job was to keep one another learning at their best as much of the time as they could. Everyone helped to clear up the room before they left, etc. I needed these rules to keep me in a good state while I was working and was rigid about them. Once, with a group of the girls, there was what seemed to me to be a sudden uproar with name calling, shouting, rudeness and mayhem. I called for order and found myself raising my voice uncharacteristically. When we eventually settled, I wondered aloud what had happened to trigger the behaviour. A sullen girl said, 'It's you miss, you're being extra, Naomi was late and you didn't say nothing to her and you said she couldn't just do that and now she can...' And there it was: a lack of congruency in me triggered a whole load of angry, fearful behaviour in them. They'd waited to see me deal effectively with Naomi and when I didn't I lost their trust and respect. This was a great lesson to me.

How does this work?

If I extract the beliefs and behaviours that inform my work, they look something like this:

Beliefs

- The children aren't broken and don't need fixing. Their responses will make complete sense at some level and need to be treated with respect.
- The course must be code congruent: the way it is set up, designed and delivered must be congruent with the behaviours we want from and for the teenagers.
- The teenagers will make more useful choices for themselves when they have more understanding and control of their responses and behaviours.

Behaviours

- Be straight forward – tell the truth whenever you can and be clear what you can and can't do and what you don't know.
- Know your own patterns: what you like, dislike, how you learn and any of your known prejudices.

“
Clean language helps to reveal what is there – the patterns and relationships within an individual's system that mean a behaviour or belief is repeated over and over
”

This will help you work harder to build relationships with people who fall outside your preferences.

- Distinguish between what's actually being presented – what you are seeing, hearing, feeling – and the inferences you are making about it. Help the teenagers to make these same distinctions.

- Develop your sensory acuity, your ability to observe body language and to listen to what's being said. There is a range of calibration exercises for practising these skills in Training Attention's *Collaborative learning manual*.

- Build rapport – be able to alter your own patterns, style, speech and behaviour in order to have clearer communication with another person.

- Be consistent – do what you say you'll do, follow through on your commitments and be an example of what you want the teenagers to do. If you don't, apologise openly with a plan of how you'll do better next time.

Processes and tools

I mentioned neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and Clean Language earlier. NLP is a broad set of philosophies, techniques and ideas developed by a team of linguists and programmers in California in the late 1970s. If you want to investigate NLP further, you need to choose carefully, as many use it as a tool for influencing others to do what they want, rather than for building better communication generally. The excerpts above show a somewhat strange style of questioning. Clean Questions were created by New Zealand psychotherapist David Grove² and developed into a teachable model by Penny Tompkins and James Lawley³. My company, Training Attention Ltd, specialises in applying these therapeutic processes to various contexts. Clean Questions are the cornerstone of the programme and are simple to learn and tricky to use. The facilitator repeats the client's words/gestures, keeping in the space the client indicates rather than mirroring it in their own space. They then repeat a portion of the client's words/gestures and ask another question, as below.

Start: And ...[their full words exactly]. And when [whatever part of their answer you want to train their attention on] ... continue with one of these questions:

A To get attributes:

...what kind of (X) is that?

...is there anything else about (X)?

...does (X) have a size or a shape?

B To get locations:

...where is (X)?

...whereabouts is (X)?

C To get a metaphor:

...that's like what?

D To get the preceding sequence:

...what happens just before (X)?

...where does (X) come from?

E To get the following sequence:

...what happens next?

...and then what happens?

Revealing what is there

A key component of clean language is that it helps to reveal what is there – the patterns and relationships within an individual's system that mean a behaviour or belief is repeated over and over. By attending to what is there, its structure and form, without judgment, the system is able to create a model of itself. The outcome of the sessions is simply for the group to self-model and to model one another; there is no agenda for anyone to change in any way. The patterns are uncovered and their beauty and intricacy revealed. The teenagers who develop these patterns unconsciously are able to celebrate their own ingenuity and their personal strengths. Under these conditions it is relatively easy for the young people to update their models/beliefs/behaviours and to become engaged in learning more effective responses which they can design themselves. ■

Caitlin Walker specialises in applying systemic thinking to learning and professional development, using a combination of the modelling processes developed in Neuro-Linguistic Programming, the discipline of Clean Questions, and coaching – processes that result in whole system sustainable change. Email caitlin@trainingattention.co.uk

References

1 An excerpt of Training Attention's *Collaborative Learning Manual* for use in secondary schools and pupil referral units, can be downloaded free from www.trainingattention.co.uk. A training DVD teaching the basic principles will be available shortly.

2 David Grove's workshops can be accessed via www.thepractise.org

3 For a fuller description of the Symbolic Modelling Process, see James Lawley and Penny Tompkin's *Metaphors in mind* (The Developing Company Press, 2000) or visit www.cleanlanguage.co.uk

“

I used Clean Questions to help them build up these mental models and develop metaphor landscapes that helped encapsulate their understanding and share it with others

”

