

Breathing in Blue by Clapton Duck Pond

Facilitating pattern detection with 'at-risk' teenagers

"Take ten of the most disruptive year 9 students, 'at risk' of becoming offenders, from a 'failing' school in East London and persuade them to voluntarily attend 9 hours of after-school tuition to address their educational and behavioural needs. The longer term aim being that they rejoin the mainstream education system and realise their potential."

How could we get kids who were able to disrupt every classroom they entered, many of whom attended school one day in ten, some of whom were known to the police for violent, criminal behaviour, to choose to come to classes for three hours, three times a week after school to improve their behaviour and literacy skills?

One of the problems in this area seems to be that everyone is telling these young people what they should do differently. Now, if I go on a personal or professional development course and the trainer tells me I'm flawed and need fixing, then 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 can deny them or get defensive about them, and I'm less inclined to explore, experiment or learn about new behaviours available to me.

The principles important to me in engaging in personal professional development:

- I trust in 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 in new behaviours

If that worked for me, would I, could I, offer anything less to these young people? If I set up anger management classes, I presume they need to manage their anger differently. If I set up reading recovery classes I assume they need to recover their reading. 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 just emerge out of the system?

I decided to design the course on the lines of group modelling using Clean Questions, Accelerated Learning and NLP (Neuro-linguistic Programming). 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 to keep on developing in the future.

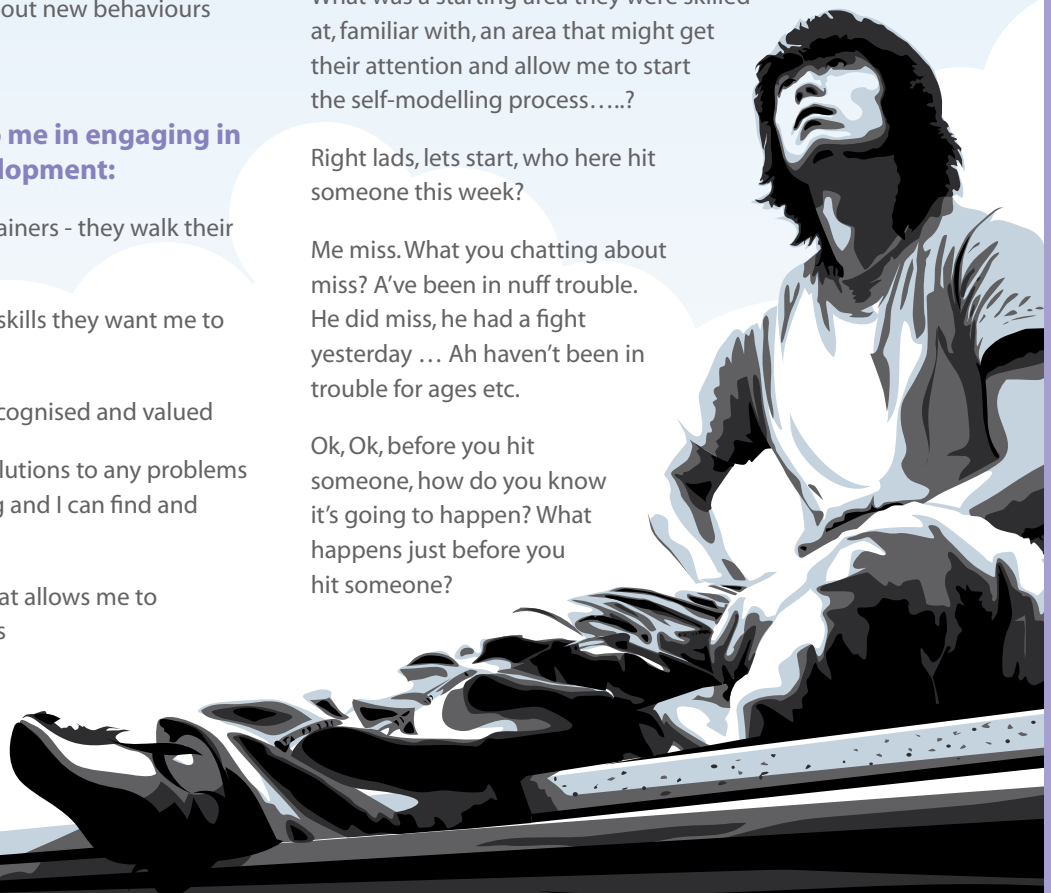
I met them 1:1 and introduced myself as a brain coach. I offered to help them find out how their brains worked and how to use them more effectively. I invited them for three sessions and all 10 of them turned up.

What was a starting area they were skilled at, familiar with, an area that might get their attention and allow me to start the self-modelling process.....?

Right lads, lets 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, Ok, before you hit someone, how do you know it's going to happen? What happens just before you hit someone?



I just switch (snaps fingers) miss

I go red

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

Ok, so you switch (snaps fingers like him) you go red, everything just goes quiet, who doesn't do that?

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 (points to feet) and get away before you explode. You go red, you switch (snaps fingers), everything just goes quiet, and when it goes quiet what kind of quiet?

(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?

Blood red (gestures vaguely towards chest)

and blood red, (Points to his chest), everything goes quiet for you, like shutters, you get all (points to feet) and you switch (snaps fingers) and when switch (snaps fingers) is there anything else about switch? (snaps fingers)

I'm fine then someone just looks at me wrong and I switch (snap fingers near his left ear) and I take them out.

you're fine, then someone looks at you wrong and you switch (snaps fingers towards his left ear), and as they look at you wrong, what kind of switch (snaps fingers towards his left ear) is that?

There's no choice, it just happens.

We've got no choice here, blood red here (points), shutters here, and you get all... (points to his feet) and get away before you explode.

And when you get all... (points to feet), what happens just before you get away?

I can feel it rising (feet tap frantically and he gestures to his legs)

I've seen him do that when he's vexed miss, his

knees shake and he just goes, just walks off.

Yeah but it takes a long time before I have to leave and I always leave before I explode

True miss. He never gets in trouble for fighting

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 (gestures at his chest), whereabouts is blood red? (He gestures by top of chest with one hand as though something's rising and the hand is holding it down)

It just gets red and I get angry, like my blood's boiling.

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

It's cooler!! (Said as though this is stating the bleeding obvious)

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

It's - (looks around and points to maroon on a poster on the wall) like that, and its here. (Points an inch lower on his chest)

And it's (points to maroon colour) and it's here points to lower on chest) and when its here, what happens before it's here.

It's purple (points to solar plexus)

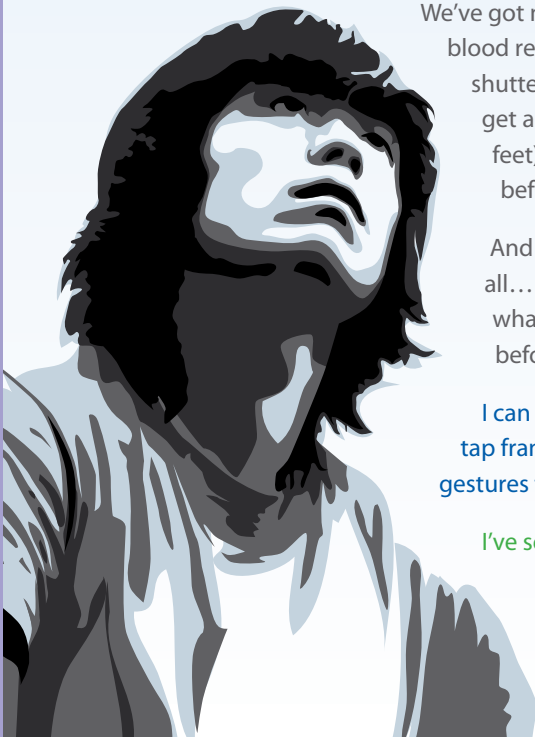
And before its purple, where is it before its purple?

Its Cool blue, like the sky, like my mum (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 (points to solar plexus) then here (points to chest) then blood red and then like your blood's boiling and then what happens after bloods boiling?

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.

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 the next session, how early can you spot that its 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 time.



Next session

So who noticed what since last session?

You know I go red? Well yesterday I felt it happening. I get up in the morning blue and relax, then I see Dad's drunk, red. (Points to belly) Then I have to put dirty clothes back on cause 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.

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.

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 self modelling skills to new areas

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 one lesson, before we started.

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

What do you mean?

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 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.

Becoming part of the system

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 5 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 faced 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 - this sentence does not make sense to me - being extra what?

And there it was, a lack of congruency in me triggers 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.

There were still issues and pain and strife working with these teenagers and they tried my patience sorely at times, as I did theirs. The important thing was that this process forced me to truly consider the teenagers and their patterns with respect and I think that made all the difference.

The beliefs, behaviours, processes and tools that make up one of these programmes are outlined below.

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 setup, 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

The behaviours needed for this type of programme seem to be as follows:

1. Be straight forward - tell the truth whenever you can and be clear what you can and what you can't do and what you don't know.
2. Know your own patterns: what you like, dislike, how you learn and any of your known prejudices. This will help you to work harder to build relationships with people who fall outside of your preferences.
3. Be able to distinguish between what's actually being presented - what you are seeing, hearing, feeling - and the inferences you are making about it. Be able to help the teenagers to make these same distinctions.
4. Develop your sensory acuity, your ability to observe body language and to listen to what's being said.
5. Build rapport - be able to alter your own patterns, style, speech and behaviour in order to have clearer communication with another person.
6. 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:

NLP is a broad set of philosophies, techniques and ideas developed by a team of linguists and programmers in California in the late 70's. I can recommend Michael Grinder and Judith DeLozier as great exponents of the field. Be sure to choose your sources carefully if you want to investigate NLP as many use it as a tool for influencing others to do what they want, rather than for building better communication generally.

Clean Questions were created by New Zealand psychotherapist David Grove and developed into a teachable model by Penny Tompkins and James Lawley. My company, Training Attention Ltd, specialises in applying these therapeutic processes to business and educational 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 then ask one of the following questions and leave time for them to answer.

And(their words exactly) and when(whatever part of their answer you want to train their attention on)

To get attributes:

What kind of is that
Is there anything else about

To get locations:

Where is

Whereabouts is

Does Have a size or a shape

To get a metaphor:

That's like what?

To get the preceding sequence:

What happens just before

Where does come from

To get the following sequence:

What happens next

And then what happens

Most of these questions can be seen in practise in the story above.

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 judgement, 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 developed 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. See Lawley and Tompkin's *Metaphors in Mind* (The Developing Company Press, 2000) for a fuller description of the Symbolic Modelling Process, or if you get the opportunity, go and see David Grove himself in action by tracking his activities down at www.thepractise.org

Next steps

In the 10 years since that very first class, this process has been developed and applied to school classes, reducing bullying, team building, managing mergers, creating courses for the long-term unemployed, living corporate values, attitudinal change around diversity, improving police interviewing and many more contexts.

We are interested in having conversations and collaborations with others interested in these areas and systemic processes. Please contact us at www.trainingattention.co.uk

We have developed a Collaborative Learning Manual for use in Secondary schools and Pupil Referral Units. An excerpt can be downloaded for free from www.trainingattention.co.uk. A training DVD teaching the basic principles is available from our website www.trainingattention.co.uk where you can also access information on other courses.

My sincerest thanks to the young men and women who taught me; to keep it 'clean', keep it 'real'.

Published in *Counselling Children and Young People Journal*, Winter 2006