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On the Back Foot - in which we aim to re-affirm our enlightenment values despite being temporarily in an uncomfortable position

By Jon Owen

photo: Leslie Chatfield

The definition of an educated person includes scepticism towards dogma, authority and 'common sense'. The openness to investigation and fact that should also impel journalism and governance – it's about 'debugging' yourself, to the extent that it's possible, and goes with functioning in a democracy.

It is unnatural – you need that in science but not only in science.

Stephen Pinker

I'm pretty sure that 'on the back foot' is a phrase that has its roots in cricket. As I understand it, it describes the situation you find yourself in when, as a batsman (batswoman?), you are on the receiving end of a bowling onslaught. I'm not much of a cricketer, but can imagine my composure being rattled by an especially fast delivery or two. I can also see how this phrase may have cleared the boundary of the cricket pitch and landed in other arenas of modern life where similar situations occur: interviews; public speaking; coaching and teaching.

In this article I intend to explore how sometimes the kinds of metaphors that pervade our language might not be as useful as they seem, either for ourselves or those around us. I want to invite you to think about your default ways of responding to situations that occur when you are managing learning, with a

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view to ensuring that they are truly 'fit for purpose'. I hope to show you that being 'on the back foot' can be a wonderful place to be - at least in terms of discharging our responsibilities as educators. But first let's go back, way back in time to the Dark Ages - a time before enlightenment...

A long time ago, when I was making my first tentative steps as a trainee instructor, my contemporaries and I were pursuing our technical qualifications: our mountain leadership and paddlesport coaching awards and the like. We were petrified of going to certain mountain centres for any of these 'hard skills' courses and what's more, we found that our 'elders and betters' also considered a visit to them with some trepidation. But why?

It seemed to boil down to a perception that at these places, there was an ethos of: "there's my way, and the wrong way" of executing skills like tying yourself into a rope, and setting up belays on rock and snow. Now we would concede that yes, some techniques are objectively safer than others: we could accept that, for example, some knots fail at lower loads than others, but there seemed to be a bloody-minded resistance about allowing discussion of the merits of - as far as we could see - pretty equally matched variants. Our peers came back with tales - tall tales perhaps - of taciturn, peremptory tutors who took no truck with alternative techniques aside from their own preferred ones. I had some personal experience of this, and found it an unpleasant culture in which to spend time. But aside from that, something troubled me from an educational point of view. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Having recently read some inspiring thinking from the likes of Stephen Pinker - a Harvard Professor of cognitive psychology - I can see now how this and other kinds of aggressive defence of our viewpoints threaten the very foundations of science and education.

What crystallised all this for me was an interview Pinker gave The Times recently. In it, he plugged his new book *The Stuff of Thought* (of course), but he also explained why the inclination for educators to hold onto their authority has the potential to undermine post-enlightenment science and, by extension, confound the aims of education. He asserts that:

"the goal of education is to make up for the shortcomings in our instinctive ways of thinking about (and behaving within) the physical and social world".

Crikey: we'd better unpack that a bit, to make any sense of it. What, for example, does Pinker mean by these 'instinctive shortcomings'? Well, he uses what I think is an extremely insightful example, and one which seems very relevant for practitioners of outdoor learning:

"Authority is to be recognised and discounted, so that if a pipsqueak student challenges me as a big-shot professor, I can't stare them down because I have credentials and they don't. Though that is probably the default way in which humans interact, it is a way which we turn off in science... ...Such a response would be perfectly appropriate in a family or among friends - but it can lead to the polite consensus of traditional societies, as opposed to the open debate we depend upon in a democracy or the scientific community."

This is what is meant by 'debugging' yourself, as mentioned in the opening quote. When those whose learning we are managing seem to challenge us, we might habitually, instinctively, want to re-assert our authority. This is only natural, Pinker says, but to do so is to threaten the social structures that are required to sustain science and even democracy itself. And, in case that process of 'zooming out' to implications at population and societal levels has you switching off, let's begin draw to a close with some thoughts on potential implications on an individual level: i.e. what does this mean for your learners and for you?

So, there you are, out and about with your group, dealing with some content or process - it could be J-strokes, communication, or glaciology - when one of them follows on from something you have said with a comment that, whilst relating to the subject at hand, could be taken as a challenge. You are (naturally, instinctively) tempted to 'put them in their place' and might even rationalise this to yourself along the lines of something like managing their safety (I think that particular rationalisation happens a lot in our field). And of course they *might* be trying to push your buttons, or to push the boundaries of acceptable and/or safe behaviour.

Regardless as to their *actual* motives, I would argue that if you mount a robust counter-challenge they

- and any of the rest of the group that are paying attention to the interaction – are going to be a lot less likely to pipe up in the future. So what? Well, you will have just made them a lot less likely to take responsibility for their own thinking, their own learning. Which would be a shame.

So what alternatives are there? Well, these are easier to write about and to plan to do than they are to actually deploy whilst 'on the back foot'. They take a certain amount of vigilance and self-awareness allied with impulse control – not the easiest of tasks to juggle alongside other more immediate and critical demands like counting heads, driving mini-buses and planning what to do after lunch.

Anyway, when it has worked for me, it usually starts with me noticing my reaction to this perceived 'attack', and consciously attempting to set that aside, whilst telling myself something cheesy and celebratory like: "Houston, we have an engaged learner!" and "I want to encourage more of that!" It seems to be critical that you find this self-talk plausible, but also that it grows from something that you recognise as valued by you. (More about this later.)

If I am fairly sure there is an aspect of malice or rudeness to their comment, I might address both *what* they've said as well as *how* they've said it in two separate and distinct responses. Ignoring any potential naughty intent might be a better course of action for the most part, though. What message do I want them to hear alongside the literal content of my response? Something along the lines of: "It's great that you're sufficiently into this to comment – your contribution moves my thinking about this on in an interesting and exciting way. (Share how.) What does it do for other folks here?" Then I might want to tune in to non-verbal responses from other group members, either to bring them in and/or to check out whether I might want to re-state or modify my message. Well, that's the plan anyway...

I'll leave you with an explanation of the tagline of the title – 'in which we aim to re-affirm our Enlightenment values...!', for those of you who are rightly questioning how it relates to this topic. A vital part of my own strategy for resisting the temptation to put (what the un-



enlightened – and I include myself here - might call) 'gobby' learners in their place is the internal monologue that I deploy. It seems to be vital that this self-talk has roots in something I really value. This is very likely to be different for you. For me, what seems to be working well (at least at the moment) is a determination to align myself with what I see as the most wonderful gift that science has given society, encapsulated by this quote from David Colquhoun, who writes the Improbable Science blog:

The enlightenment was a beautiful thing. People cast aside dogma and authority. They started to think for themselves. Natural Science flourished. Understanding of the real world increased. The hegemony of religion slowly declined. Real universities were created and eventually democracy took hold.

So if that doesn't 'flick your switch', but you still want to find strategies for coming off 'the back foot' in ways that are as positive as they can be for those that you coach, teach or instruct, you might want to find a different way of giving yourself 'a good talking to'. Best of luck. ■

References

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Author's Notes

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Photos: Cricket at article start by Leslie Chatfield.