



# pDT

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
TODAY

Issue: 15.1/2

## The new professionals – special double issue!

**Graham Handscomb** provides an extended guide on *How to Collaborate and Learn* in the new self-managing school environment

**Paul Clarke** says it is imperative for teachers and pupils alike to become eco-literate

**Raphael Wilkins** explores how enquiring professionals can counter the pernicious growth of managerialism

**Alison Ekins** outlines an effectiveness framework for SENCOs

**Gareth Mills** heralds a new approach to professional development using a seven stage toolkit for school-based enquiry

Empowering teachers, liberating learners! **Hazel Bryan** and colleagues show the way through action enquiry.

**Emily Houghton** gives the enquiring practitioner's guide to getting the most out of the Web

**Sara Bubbs** and **Peter Earley** investigate better ways to use training and development days

Visit our website at [www.teachingtimes.com](http://www.teachingtimes.com)

IM  
IMAGINATIVE  
MINDS



# Thinking to learn

Are our classrooms fettered by a narrow, data and results driven curriculum and unimaginative teaching? This is one of the key questions posed by **Kevin Steel** in his quest to develop a thinking school culture. In this rich narrative of her school's journey to produce a community of teachers thinking deeply about the relationship between teaching and learning, we are given an insider's picture of how to become a thinking school which transforms teachers and pupils alike.

**S**t Robert of Newminster is a denominational comprehensive secondary school and sixth form college of some 1600 learners, drawn from varying socio-economic groups with a number of learners coming from areas of high deprivation. There has been a constant process of induction for staff and learners into the application of various 'thinking tools' since 2007, as we worked toward accreditation by the University of Exeter as a Thinking School.

## ■■■ Why did we decide to become a Thinking School?

A new leadership group was formed in 2005, following

the appointment of a new headteacher and the retirement of other members of the group. There was agreement that we clearly needed to provide a strategic direction for teaching and learning. Because there had never been a policy on this, and no plan for moving teaching and learning forward, it seemed that the inherited culture was one of groups of teachers working in small isolated pockets being asked to face up to the challenges of inspections, increasingly swamped by data and school improvement programmes but rarely given the opportunity to engage or collaborate with each other about teaching, learning or about thinking.

With a policy in place by 2006 and a Teaching and

Learning Enhancement Plan published the same year, the formation of a Teaching and Learning Steering Group became a priority. Newly appointed to the role of Assistant Head Teacher responsible for the development of Teaching and Learning, it was important for me to harness whatever creative energy I could find to help take the school forward. There was no real route map for this group so we set about considering the good practice that already existed in the school. Gradually ideas began to develop and eventually the group was to be the focus for exploring and sharing as well as being a critical friend. A school model for learning began to develop.

Initially, the group shared good ideas and more often than not some outstanding ideas, but in truth they were no more than that. Members of the group, excited by them, took them on board and tried to implement them in their own classrooms, but there was no sense of a strategic direction yet. National Strategies and AFL came along, but there was not yet the pedagogical shift required to allow these to make a difference across our classrooms.

### Cultural shift

There was clearly something going on, however. Who talks and what is talked about says much about whether or not impact is being made. There was certainly a feeling of new energy around in the school. Staff were demonstrating a desire for collaboration with others. More teachers joined the group, and a cultural shift began to occur, as conversations about the pedagogy of teaching and learning sprang up in the staffroom. Collaborative professional development programmes began to produce a community of teachers thinking deeply about the relationship between teacher effectiveness and learning. Staff began to develop new knowledge and skills.

### Key questions

Teachers had, however, identified the key problems (or were they the key questions?):

Our learners were too reliant on us, they were lacking in the skills necessary for effective learning and their thinking skills needed to be developed considerably. Knowing it is too easy to 'blame the kids', it became

increasingly obvious that the problem was not the learner. Were the overall interactions in classrooms fettered by a narrow, increasingly data-driven, results-driven curriculum? Were these limited interactions, also, encouraged by teachers working in isolation, left free to choose idiosyncratic methodologies and materials based on personal values or knowledge transmitted via a variable ITT experience?

It seemed obvious that we needed a whole-school strategy to help our learners become more effective. This meant that they needed to know how to learn. Further key questions began to emerge. What did it mean to be a learner? What did good learners do? What did good learning look like? What did it feel like? What did it sound like? What would it be like to teach a class full of highly effective learners?

Then came the tough question. What do we change, or rather what can we change? Having been through TVEI, Flexible Learning and Student-Centred Learning initiatives in the past, the thoughts turned once more to the problem-solving enquiry-based learning models that had been subjugated to a target-driven data-driven, curriculum-impoverishing, results-based agenda. Experience had, however, brought with it caution. It told me that to ask staff to take the risk of undertaking the pedagogical change necessary for moving towards an enquiry-based classroom would be doomed to fail unless we first equipped both learners and teacher with the skills and the confidence to manage that change without sacrificing standards.

### Meaningful conversations about teaching and learning

A Learning to Learn programme was introduced into the Y7 tutorial curriculum. The programme was an off the shelf product which challenged staff to consider what the purpose of the tutorial programme was and why we chose to do it in the way that we did. Challenging staff to consider themselves not solely as teachers of subjects but of learners who need to know how to learn about subjects was a challenge but was met with openness and a healthy scepticism. Teachers had to adopt a methodology with which, for the most part, they were not comfortable, given its reliance on

ICT (always a barrier to change and an excuse for not changing). Our learners, however, for the first time engaged in meaningful conversations with teachers about learning and learning styles. They learned how to be a good learner but inevitably, like many tutorial programmes, it remained separate from mainstream classroom learning. So its potential for causing a shift on its own was questionable.

### **The “Oh of course” moment!**

At this point, I responded to the University of Exeter advert which referred to becoming a ‘Thinking School’ and this was followed up by an invitation from Thinking Schools International (TSI) to attend a conference at the University of Exeter led by Dr. David Hyerle from the USA. Hyerle placed theory and practice alongside each other, giving evidence from his work with teachers and learners in the USA. The test of a good conference is whether or not I experience the ‘Oh of course!’ moment, when what is being said makes complete sense and has direct application to my own situation in my own classroom in our large comprehensive school. This was one of those.

Dr Hyerle presented his visual tools for thinking or ‘Thinking Maps’, clearly different from other visual tools, and it seemed obvious to me that they would provide us with the missing link in AFL practice which we had been ‘implementing’ and not really making progress with for quite some time. Until the introduction of Thinking Maps, teachers were mainly assessing outputs after the thinking had already occurred – and these outputs were often flawed with errors in thinking, structure, presentation and concept development.

Teachers spent time correcting these errors, and giving work back, to resolve issues that the learner had clearly not assimilated within the lesson. However, the Hyerle Thinking Maps meant that it was possible to get learners to make their thought-processes and analyses visible, so that their thinking - comparing and contrasting, sequencing, classifying, defining, identifying cause and effect relationships that occurred at the processing stage - could be accessed by teachers. Once the thinking of individual learners is accessed, then scaffolding and correcting misconceptions begins to have impact in the

teaching and learning processes in our classrooms. The quality of the work then produced increased significantly. Furthermore it was clear that Thinking Maps would provide our learners and teachers with a common language about thinking and learning.

It was listening to Hyerle that was the really catalyst for developing St Robert’s as a Thinking School. There already existed in our school a vision for the strategic leadership of teaching and learning, but it was now being modified and more sharply focused; place thinking at the centre of everything we do and school improvement will surely follow.

### **How did we put our vision into practice?**

I was convinced, but what about the whole school? How could it be presented as not another initiative in a school super-saturated with initiatives? I had two things going in my favour. First, I was privileged to lead a teaching and learning group filled with talented and enthusiastic practitioners who collectively were highly effective and quite obviously enjoyed teaching. All wanted to become better at it, and there was a sense that individually and together they were capable of producing increased student success. I also knew I would have the explicit support of the Headteacher and other senior leaders.

### **Accessing the world’s best ideas**

It was through the contributions of the consultant provided by TSI that the next part of the jigsaw fell into place. There was an international perspective to the teaching of thinking that stretched across the globe. The consultant talked about his experience as a cognitive co-ordinator in a school in New Zealand. He shared his model of how the school organised its cognitive curriculum and the impact of it on their outcomes helped focus our thinking. It seemed to me that only by helping staff access the world’s best ideas, practices and training would we produce world class teachers as expert leaders of learning in world class classrooms.

### **Fostering positive behaviours and dispositions**

The original plan was to skill-up some of the team in the theory and practice of Thinking Maps, with the



intention of introducing them in an INSET session in September 2007. TSI then introduced me to Bena Kallick and the Habits of Mind developed with Art Costa. Again it was so obvious; why do schools spend so much time dealing with immature and unintelligent behaviour in classrooms when what we should be doing is strategically developing our learners' intelligent and mature behaviours through a process of recognition and reward? We needed to focus on what it means to be an educated person and the intelligent dispositions of a successful learner - thinking flexibly, being persistent, being able to communicate with clarity and precision. It made complete sense.

### **Habits of Mind**

These three experiences convinced me we needed to find a way of immersing the school in the common language of the Maps and the Habits of Mind. Once we had the common language then the strategic plan and the vision would be much easier to communicate. So Habits of Mind as a parallel strategy were at the last minute added

to our INSET days. We trained members of the teaching and learning group to help us lead the session, and on the whole it was fairly well received. There would be a programme of training learners across the whole school in the first six weeks on how to use the Hyerle Thinking Maps. Staff would generally commit to using the Maps across the whole school.

Less time was given to the introduction of the Habits of Mind and maybe the strategy was not fully understood but I was not disheartened because we had spent a lot of time as a school discussing the type of learner we wanted to see and the Habits clearly would help us focus on developing our learners instead of wringing our hands about their deficiencies. Perhaps it was an error to deliver two completely different pedagogical approaches in one day but I was convinced of the need to not light only one fire but many and the Habits of Mind were used collaboratively with the Maps. The focus on learner dispositions was after all central to our discussions as a school. We had said they were poor learners and poor thinkers and I was challenging staff

to answer a fundamental question: We know what our problem is, so what are we doing about it?

### **Sustaining the momentum**

I ensured that we did not fall into the trap of putting all our energies and professional capital into one initiative that might fail. I decided that the Maps and Habits alone were not enough to ensure good or outstanding learning experiences for our learners. The model of learning for St Robert's was still being developed but could it be sustained? Alongside what we had already done, we introduced more training on Habits of Mind, Questioning, Higher order Thinking, Philosophy for Children and Creative Thinking and invested heavily in the development of individual expertise in teachers. There was now an energy for collaboration on lesson design and for practising what had been learned. Certain classrooms became powerhouses of collaborative energy.

I understood that becoming a Thinking School was difficult enough – sustaining its momentum might be impossible. My aim from the outset had been to develop a leadership, well informed, deeply developed and widely distributed, in order to support the development of the emerging learning model. Crucial to this would be the redirection of CPD. It was necessary to communicate the message that 'Thinking' is the heartbeat of learning. Strategically we had immersed the school in a culture of thinking but to sustain it, levers had to be added in order to ensure that the vision of a Thinking School became the school priority for all teaching and learning. Part of setting out our clear expectations of all staff was the need to ensure that it was understood by everyone that becoming a Thinking School was not just another initiative or 'badge collecting' exercise but was to be the foundation stone for improving the quality and enjoyment of the teaching and learning experience for both staff and learners alike.

### **Sharing best practice**

It is the criteria we set for observing lessons and the performance management targets which crucially make our expectations clear to all staff. We gave a clear signal that we expect all staff to contribute to the development of questioning and thinking tools as well as thinking skills

in our learners. We also differentiated our performance expectations according to responsibilities.

We use our highly popular Sharing Best Practice voluntary lunchtime and evening sessions, and directed time, to support other staff who wish to learn more. Twenty or so staff voluntarily give up their lunchtimes on a Wednesday and we always ensure that they can take something new away with them to try in their own classrooms. Increasingly, we provide training for each other via learning conversations. Most recently I have developed the idea of providing 'drop in sessions' where a teacher brings along an idea for a lesson that he or she want help with or are seeking to improve. Over a biscuit and a cup of tea, staff from other subject areas set about the collaborative exercise of turning an idea into an outstanding component of a lesson. One teacher of a group of a difficult group of learners was genuinely shocked by a lesson that had been co-designed. 'I didn't know just how much they were capable of learning, nor of how much I would enjoy teaching them,' she smiled and then added the caveat 'It's bloody hard work!'

### **Status report and what the future holds**

The school had worked hard, and the staff for the most part had themselves shown the Habits of Mind required to make the management of change a smooth process: thinking flexibly, remaining open to new learning, applying past knowledge to new situations, thinking creatively and above all displaying the ability to work interdependently, with persistence and a sense of humour. There were sceptics, of course, but for the most part it was healthy scepticism.

### **Evaluation and impact**

However, the time came to ask the crunch questions regarding impact. Until recently, there had been no formal analysis of the time pupils spend on higher order thinking. We speculated that the implementation of Thinking Maps in 2008 had facilitated the change in teacher instructional levels, resulting in less time being spent by learners in gathering information and more time being spent processing, applying and evaluating

information. At St Robert's, the aim of our research was to investigate whether our strategy for introducing Thinking Maps into school was successful.

Our intentions were to foster a common thinking language amongst students and staff; to develop a greater number of independent thinkers and learners; to place a greater focus on higher order thinking; to improve teacher confidence, collaboration and communication; to increase enjoyment and motivation; and to improve behaviour and raise achievement.

The results of the action research evaluation (details of which can be found at [www.thinkingfoundation.org/research](http://www.thinkingfoundation.org/research)) have suggested that Thinking Maps support and encourage our students in the development of higher order thinking skills. As St Robert's prepares to be recognised by Exeter University as a Thinking School, we hope that our students will continue to develop the learning dispositions and habits of mind they need to equip them for lifelong learning.

The impact on the learning experience in the classroom is evident. If the learning is based on thinking, then thinking is the most important thing to be doing in the classroom. Learners are clearer about what they are doing and why they are doing it. There are more conversations about the thinking necessary to complete the task and the tools they might need to perform the tasks set. Less time is spent on gathering information and more time is spent processing and applying it in order to go beyond what is already known and thought. More children are being increasingly engaged through more challenging and stimulating activities. Both class exclusions and persistent absenteeism have fallen significantly in recent years and are now very low – and the improved learning experiences of students may be something to do with it.

**Kevin Steel is Assistant headteacher at St. Robert Newminster School.**

## This series is based on Edward de Bono's

### Thinking Hats concept



#### Thinking Hats

By Anna Forsyth

All books priced at £17.99 each

Thinking Hats - Book 1 Ages 5-7

Thinking Hats - Book 2 Ages 7-9

Thinking Hats - Book 3 Ages 9-11

Creativity is the wealth of tomorrow. Developing laterality in approach to issues is exciting, challenging and critical learning. World-renowned Edward de Bono's concept of 'Thinking Hats' has proven itself to be an excellent way to ensure that students consider problems and issues from different perspectives; 'actively thinking'.

This series of three books teaches the use of Edward de Bono's six thinking hats; white for facts and information, yellow for optimism, green for creativity, blue for the overall picture, black for negative, red for emotions.

A series of 40 lessons in each book spans almost all the curriculum areas so that students practice using thinking hats in many contexts.