Unleash your
inner evaluator

Change begins with you. It might sound like advice from a self-help manual, but meaningful self-evaluation and extensive research is vital for developing individual and whole-school practice. **Dave Walters** explains.

'People travel to wonder at the height of the mountains, at the huge waves of the seas, at the long course of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars, and yet they pass by themselves without wondering.'

These words, attributed to Saint Augustine, were first drawn to my attention through a paper by Dr Cheryl Hunt[1]. The message they convey has been further strengthened by the work of Professor John Hattie, and his notion of leaders and teachers as evaluators and activators[2]. Indeed his mantra 'Know Thy Impact' as a leader and teacher relies on bringing the attention back to the 'self' as a change agent[3].

I aim to honour these themes by providing here a working model of how we have applied the notion of leaders and teachers as researchers and activators at Clyst Vale

Community College, where I am deputy principal. It is worth noting though that I have changed Hattie's 'teachers as evaluators' to 'teachers as researchers'. The rationale for this and the key differences between evaluation and research will feature in my concluding section.

Establishing core purpose and values

Whitehead and McNiff bring the focus of leaders to the 'self' through what they call a 'living theory' approach to action research[4]. Firstly, they do this by stressing the importance of living one's core values and purpose throughout the process. Obviously, this relies on one actually having a 'fix' on these aspects and being able to articulate them from the outset. Indeed, Whitehead and McNiff actually see the extent to which one lives one's core values and purpose forming the basis of criteria and judgements relating to the validity, legitimacy and significance of one's work. Secondly, they point to the need to rethink how we formulate research questions and suggest the following:

'From living theory perspectives, the unit of appraisal is the practitioner's own account of their educational influence in learning as they ask, research and answer questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?'

Examples of what I would describe as 'living theory evaluative research questions' are listed below and are ones that featured in developments at Clyst Vale:

- How can I improve the quality of collaborative group work in my Year 8 geography class?
- How can I foster dialogic talk in my Year 9 English class?
- How can I challenge the behaviour of a group of Year 10 boys in my science class in a way that improves their commitment to learning?
- How can we more fully integrate the college community so that its members can play a part in leading the learning of others and also develop their own knowledge, skills and understanding in an effective and consistent way?
- How can we embed a range of cognitive tools across the college?

These research questions have transformation, empowerment, emancipation and social reform at their core. They set out to do things differently, allow those involved to 'run with things', break free from external constraints, and ensure that no one is disadvantaged in the process. The core purpose of the college in which I work is to develop as a 'Thinking School', and as such, the questions we ask relate directly to what it means to be a Thinking School.

On their website, **Thinking Schools International** (TSI) explain that 'a school which is successfully developing as a thinking community will strive to ensure that all students are developing and demonstrating independent and co-operative learning skills using a range of thinking tools and strategies.' You will notice that the final evaluative research question relates to this aspect of being a Thinking School.

In order to address this research question, we used

Burden's SPARE 'wheel' model of 'Illuminative Evaluation'[5] as our working application of evaluative research – the 'living theory' dimension implicit in the style of research question and the values and core purpose underpinning the process. Burden's model begins with the 'setting' or context of the research, then moves through the 'plan', 'action', 'reaction' and 'evaluation' stages. Although presented in a rather linear format, it has to be stressed that it follows a cycle of enquiry. At Clyst Vale, individual teachers, leaders and trainee teachers have used this approach effectively to improve their practice and those of their teams. (The appendix provided at the end of this article is an example of the template we use at Clyst Vale to individually improve our practice through evaluative research. It follows Professor Burden's SPARE approach, and can be used as a writing frame, or as a structure for your narrative evaluation).

What follows is an account of how we addressed the 'living theory evaluative research' question – 'How can we embed a range of cognitive tools across the college'?

Setting – the need for change

Clyst Vale Community College (CVCC) is a medium-sized secondary school in the South West of England. It is a true comprehensive in every sense of the word and has an inclusive ethos. Our Thinking School journey started in 2009 in response to reflections at subject and whole-college level relating to high stakes testing and its impact on the learning process experienced by our students.

Among staff members, there was a growing feeling, backed up by evidence from internal and external evaluations, that students were not developing the cognitive skills required for independent study and that learning and teaching leant too much towards content at the expense of higher-order cognitive skills. Students were passive in the learning process on the whole and were growing reliant on their teachers for much of their learning. The predominantly traditional curriculum of GCSEs presented a real dilemma for the college, as there was evidence that some schools and colleges were pursuing alternative qualifications in response to similar pressures, not least of which was the need to improve league table performance.

CVCC realised that maintaining challenge for students meant a change of pedagogical approach rather than curriculum engineering, particularly as our curriculum was broad (albeit almost exclusively GCSE based) relative to our size and therefore should present an appropriate challenge for our students. As Deputy Principal (Teaching and Learning), I had recently completed a professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) at Exeter University Graduate School of Education under the expert supervision of Professor

> ## Students were passive in the learning process on the whole and were growing reliant on their teachers for much of their learning.

Bob Burden, Director of the Cognitive Education Development Unit, and so had recent high quality understanding of cognitive education, together with Exeter University's working association with Thinking Schools International.

Extensive discussions with a variety of CVCC staff and community revealed optimistic support for cognitive education developments and we were confident of an 80 per cent 'buy in' from staff, as this figure reflected the percentage of staff who had positive attitudes towards innovation.

Plan – optimistic and ambitious

Following an initial meeting with Richard Cummins at Thinking Schools International, a series of whole college and departmental formal training in cognitive education development and cognitive tools was scheduled. Initially, we decided to focus on Thinking Maps, Thinking Hats and Bloom's Taxonomy as the main cognitive tools as it struck a balance between variety and focus.

The initiative not only had the full support of the Principal and School Leadership Team but also the Governing Body, two members of which were part of the 'drive team' set up to keep the momentum going throughout the initiative's introduction and development. An 'organic' development plan was drawn up and translated into various formats for different audiences to maintain clarity for teachers, governors, support staff, parents and students. Our main aim was to add a cognitive dimension to other pedagogical approaches already established, particularly those relating to formative assessment, or Assessment for Learning.

Action – tackling the complications

Two whole-college training events were undertaken to introduce the Thinking School initiative, develop awareness of our chosen cognitive tools, and provide specific training in the use of Thinking Maps (including bespoke resource folders being provided to all teaching staff).

Although the 'drive team' was appropriately composed in terms of number (ten in number, providing breadth of input while not being too large that interaction within the group was diluted) and plans were understood in terms of roles and responsibilities, it was soon apparent that this team needed additional and 'different' training if they were to effectively support colleagues in the development of cognitive tools in an ongoing way. Therefore, all members of the drive team undertook 'trainers' training in the use of Thinking Maps as this particular cognitive tool was more readily applicable by the majority of teaching staff across a variety of subjects.

This capacity to provide in-house support across a whole range of subject areas meant that we were able to make progress when staff presented 'lack of training' as potential obstacles. Our then lesson observation pro-forma proved to be inadequate for the purpose of tracking the use of cognitive tools both as a teaching strategy and in terms of students' usage. Therefore, in order to gauge the extent to which cognitive tools were being developed in the classroom, we had to modify our lesson planning and observation paperwork. As part of the observation, the teacher would now be evaluated as either 'focusing', 'developing', 'establishing' or 'enhancing' their use of Thinking Maps, Thinking Hats, Bloom's language, and other cognitive tools.

Reaction – largely positive

Our initial optimism of an 80 per cent 'buy-in' proved to be realistic, as when lesson observation feedback gained from appraisal and subject reviews was collated, the large majority of staff were shown to be routinely using Thinking Maps in particular. At least half of staff had also begun to quickly extend their repertoire to other cognitive tools as appropriate.

However, two common issues emerged. The first was the lack of understanding of what the Thinking Maps were designed to focus on. Some staff simply saw the maps

as graphic organisers. We had to revisit this aspect in several twilight briefings to get colleagues to begin their planning and usage with the question, 'What thought process is this lesson going to develop in my students?', and then asking 'What Thinking Map will help students organise their thinking so that this process can be developed?'. The second issue also related to the Thinking Maps and that was a problem on the part of the teachers' understanding of the meta-cognitive frame of reference. Again, this also had to be revisited regularly throughout the 18 month implementation phase and beyond.

We used the then Year 8 cohort at the start of implementation as our mechanism for monitoring impact. Student achievement outcomes for this cohort are high (the internal college data for these students, currently in Year 10, indicate that they are poised to achieve well above the national attainment, and progress figures are such that they would set an all time college record) and their attitude in terms of enthusiasm and enjoyment for learning is excellent compared to previous cohorts. The 'Myself as a Learner Scale' proved useful in terms of gathering data relating to this latter aspect and outcomes are significantly positive.

While we are not making cause-effect claims that reflect the positivist 'gold standard' research protocols of Randomised Controlled Trials, we do have a picture gleaned through an 'Illuminative Evaluation' protocol more in tune with the critical paradigm which indicates outcomes for students have been enhanced. The views of parents and teachers all add weight to this conclusion. The following quote from our Thinking School accreditation visit in September 2012 confirms that we have been successful in our original aim set out at the beginning of this initiative:

'Clyst Vale Community College provides a good example of how the cognitive approach to learning can complement other pedagogical approaches in seeking to meet the educational needs of students, while at the same time enhancing a values-led approach to education. In doing so, it fully warrants accreditation as a Thinking School and is afforded that status by Exeter University's Cognitive Education Development Unit.'

Evaluation – we can do better!

The focus on embedding cognitive tools across the college worked well overall and this coupled with the predicted outcomes of our students, indicate that our strategic direction and associated 'organic' development plan need to be maintained. However, some key areas need to be addressed if this initiative is to become incorporated into the culture and practices of the whole college. These areas are listed below:

- Students need to be encouraged and provided with opportunities to select their own cognitive tools to solve a given assignment, task or problem. They also need to justify their choice and decision, clearly and coherently, to learn to take risks by experimenting with a variety of tools in an optimistic and proactive manner, and thus learn what might not work in different situations.
- The development of Habits of Mind via a formal curriculum entitlement, together with a cross curricular infusion and intervention focus, may work to help raise the profile of the required learning dispositions and also provide the 'practice' required to make them habitual. This needs to be an intrinsic part of the work of the 'Schools' within CVCC as a whole (whole college INSET already booked for September 2013).
- More effective learning dialogue may be fostered by extending the use of Bloom's taxonomy and open-ended questioning, so that students learn how to reflect on the process of their own thinking rather than merely focus on an expected outcome, and ultimately articulate this process to others.
- Continue to consolidate the application of the philosophy underpinning the cognitive approach to learning. More parental involvement and awareness might help the college community to further support students in their learning (transition work with parents of current Year 6 students is already planned and a schedule of parental support sessions will feature on the calendar for the forthcoming academic year).
- Closer INSET links with the feeder primary schools to further develop cognitive approaches might strengthen transition and give students an earlier start to more independent study – this will build and strengthen work already undertaken with

feeder primary schools (for example our Local Learning Community Conference, in January 2013).

■ Continued networking with other schools and colleges may serve to stimulate reflection on best pedagogical practice and the application of cognitive tools for leadership and management decision making purposes.

Making the jump from evaluation to research

When looking to shift from evaluation to evaluative research, I am drawn to the definition of educational research offered by Stenhouse: 'Research, I have suggested, is systematic and sustained enquiry, planned and self-critical, which is subjected to public criticism and to empirical tests where these are appropriate.'[6] Although evaluation and research may be seen to share some common methods (questionnaires, interviews, observation, documentary and visual evidence), it must be remembered that research does have unique qualities that set it apart from evaluation.

Schools typically follow a self-evaluation process that involves the planned, systematic and sustained collation of evidence that is then fed into some form of prescribed self-evaluation form (SEF, as it is called in the UK) so that objectives and priorities can then be generated.

Shift 1 is to move from self-evaluation forms that produce objectives, to ones that generate research questions of the style 'How can we/I improve…..?'. I have no problem with retaining established self-evaluation categories (achievement, behaviour, quality of teaching and so on.), rather I am suggesting that evaluative research questions are designed to 'get underneath' these areas specifically. The extent to which current self-evaluation practices are truly self-critical is open to debate in my view. All too often, I experience a defensive stance among colleagues who see criticism as a challenge to their work. This can distort their own self-evaluations, as this requires an admission that things need to improve.

Thus, shift 2 and 3 means being open to evaluating one's own impact in an honest and self-critical way and then being equally receptive when one's work is judged by others. Shift 3 is pivotal to moving evaluation to evaluative research. In other words, we need to provide opportunities for our work to be 'subjected to public criticism'. Now there are a number of ways this can be achieved. For example, some colleagues may be following accredited programmes that lead to presentations, assignments, publications, conferences and formal thesis defence. To gain accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School by the Cognitive Education Development Unit, Exeter University Graduate School of Education, researching professionals are expected to offer articles relating to best practice to publications such as the school magazine, local newspapers, the school website and professional publications (this article is a working example of the latter!). Other forums where our work can be made public are leader/teacher learning communities and action research seminars (where groups of leaders/teachers address a common issue).

Professional Learning

In order to judge the quality, validity, legitimacy and significance of evaluative research of the nature proposed by this article, I draw on the work of Whitehead and McNiff[4] and Kemmis[7] in compiling the following aspects that need particular focus:

- The extent to which the process and the outcomes have activated the learning of those involved (yes, the pupils, but also leaders, teachers and parents).
- The extent to which the process and outcomes fit with the values and core purpose espoused by the evaluative researcher(s).
- The extent to which the process and outcomes have not only contributed to knowledge but also made history by transforming what is done and how – 'Know Thy Impact'! This should also gauge the extent to which the process and outcomes stimulate what McNiff and Whitehead describe as a 'generative transformational process'. In other words, has a capacity for repeated cycles of refinement and adaptation been created? Is there evidence of 'satellite'/'spin-off' sources of development?

I hope that you will find time to apply these aspects to the example of evaluative research I have presented relating to embedding a range of cognitive tools across the school in which I work. For those still locked into the audit culture of self-evaluation where 'blind' collation of evidence leads you to asking the questions, 'Why am I doing this? What's it all for?', I suggest you pass by yourself and wonder if there is a better way.

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References

1. Hunt, C (2009) 'They pass by themselves without wondering': Using the self I, and as research, paper prepared for the 39th Annual SCUTREA Conference – Really Useful Research: Critical Perspectives on Evidence-based Policy and Practice in Lifelong Learning, 7-9th July 2009, UK: Cambridge.

2. Hattie, J (2009) Visible learning – a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement. London: Routledge.

3. Hattie, J (2012) Visible learning for teachers – maximising impact on learning. London: Routledge.

4. Whitehead, J, and McNiff, J (2006) Action research: Living theory. London: SAGE

5. Burden, R L (1998) Illuminative evaluation. Educational and Child Psychology 15, no.3: 15-23.

6. Stenhouse, L (1981) What counts as research? In Research as a basis for teaching: Readings from the work of Lawrence Stenhouse, ed. J. Rudduck and D. Hopkins, 8-19. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

7. Kemmis, S (2010) What is to be done? The place of action research. Educational Action Research 18, no. 4: 417-427.

Knowledge trails

1) School improvement is everybody's business – Research is essential to school improvement. Judy Durrant gives guidance on how inclusive enquiry, leadership and learning can maximise community engagement and build improvement capacity
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/pdt-improvement-everybodys-business

2) Meaningful self-evaluation – Graham Handscomb and Duncan Ramsey explain the important contribution self-reflection makes to school improvement.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/meaningful-self-evaluation

3) How to become a research-engaged school – Caroline Sharp gives a guide on how schools and their staff can become research engaged.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/research-engaged-school-pdt-12-2

Evaluative Research Frame

Teacher/Tutor:
Department/Year Team:
Date:
Line Manager:
Evaluative Research Question: (How can I / we improve...?)

Setting:
What is the context or situation?

You should relate this to your experience (as a teacher/tutor/leader and learner) so far, what the data appears to suggest, how the students see it, how teachers/tutors in your team see it, what the theory suggests (literature/research).

What are the attitudes within the wider community towards academic success?

What is the overall ethos regarding the possibility of educational success with this initiative?

What are the attitudes of the majority of staff members to innovation?

Plan:
What is your theory-based plan?

What did you set out to do and say, and in what order?

Why did you think this might be appropriate?

Why was the initiative considered to be the most profitable way forward?

How committed to this plan is the headteacher if s/he is not the instigator?

What exactly is hoped to be achieved?

How clear are the plans for implementation?

Do they involve the whole college or a subset?

What time frame has been set for ongoing success?

Exactly how have ideas been introduced to the staff body, the students and their parents (does everyone know what's going on)?

Has a task force of knowledgeable experts been set up to lead and monitor the introduction and implementation of this project?

How supportive are most of the staff members to this particular innovation?

Action:
What did you actually do and say?

This is where the match and mismatch will occur. This is how the plans are put into operation.

Do the core team know what is expected of them?

Are they properly prepared for implementation and the assessment of outcomes (i.e. what measures will be used)?

Is training and development adequate?

Is the implementation able to function smoothly?

What obstacles occur along the way?

Reaction:

This is where you gauge the extent to which you have won the hearts and minds of your participants.

What do the participants think and feel is going on?

What is their level of commitment to the success of the project?

Where do they see its strengths and weaknesses lying?

What changes are displayed in achievement levels compared with 'usual' expectations in general, (with regard to specific subgroups and/or individuals?

What are the effects on the students in terms of attitudes to learning in general, their views of themselves as learners and their feelings about interventions?

How satisfied do the teachers/parents feel about the outcomes?

How well do they see this form of initiative (and associated interventions) fitting into ongoing school developments?

Evaluation:

This is where decisions are made about whether to continue with the original plans, to change them, or to discontinue completely.

What aspects of the whole process worked well?

What are the areas in need of development if the initiative is to become incorporated into the culture and practices of the college?

The SPARE approach is based on the model of Illuminative Evaluation – Burden R L (1998), Illuminative evaluation Educational and Child Psychology, Vol. 15 (3).

This template has been developed and adapted for use by Dave Walters, Clyst Vale Community College.