

Promoting thoughtfulness in 6th Form students

Kate Healer

St George's V.A. School, Harpenden

Abstract

Kate Healer graduated from the Herts. MEd in Teaching and Learning in 2005. This article provides an account of her use of a classroom intervention to promote thoughtfulness in a group of middle-ability AS level Business Studies students. It describes her development of a 'key fob' of 'thoughtfulness' tools and her small-scale qualitative investigation into its impact on those students. It concludes with a critical reflection on its implications for classroom practice.

Several years ago my departmental colleagues and I were having difficulties in engaging some Business Studies students in the skills of analysis and evaluation needed to move beyond an E or D grade at A2 Level. We tried a number of initiatives such as changes in teaching style, lesson structure and differentiated support; these had some impact but did not resolve the issue. At that time senior management had also identified a core group of students for whom we were adding least value, namely those entering our sixth-form with a 5.33 to 6.33 average GCSE points profile and classified as 'middle-ability'. Some of these students were not meeting their Minimum Target Grades (MTGs). These were grades determined by the school using national data to identify the results a student entering the Sixth Form with a given GCSE / Key Stage 3 profile should achieve, at GCE AS and A2 Level.

Reflections on classroom events and pupil dialogue led me to identify a number of dispositions common to the middle-ability student in Business Studies. I realised that the staff complained of students' apparent need to be spoon-fed knowledge and their unflinching desire for the 'right' answer and refusal to accept 'it depends' answers. We were fed up with their plaintive cries of "write it on the board, miss and we'll copy it down" and "can you just tell us the answer ...it's easier than working it out". We despaired of the willingness to merely regurgitate knowledge and their reluctance to take risks or test out ideas. It was my belief that these students were not acting, or even perceiving themselves, as 'thinkers'.

Invigilating an A2 Business Studies examination the following summer I noticed that many of my middle-ability students began writing almost immediately they had finished what can only have been a cursory read-through of the paper. I was surprised because the paper contained detailed appendices of statistical and graphical data and I

had given them firm advice on the need to plan answers and to allocate time appropriately between preparation and writing. Reflecting on this, and the dispositions I had identified, led me to believe that ‘thoughtfulness’, a concept that I define as a willingness to engage in deliberate thinking in a structured manner, was a closed door to them. It seemed that this lack of thoughtfulness was linked in some way to their struggle to acquire the examination skills of analysis and evaluation. I began to think that promoting thoughtfulness might have a role in raising their achievement.

The intervention

I needed an intervention to unlock and open that door; to engage middle-ability students in effortful and deliberate thinking and to move them from being dependent and passive regurgitators of knowledge to independent, pro-active thinkers. I was particularly influenced by Shrag (1988) who considers that thoughtfulness is more than the acquisition of a skill base; it is also a question of attitudes towards thinking. He argues that thoughtfulness requires a belief that thinking is worthwhile, which allows deliberateness to be balanced with flexibility, avoiding both impulsiveness and rigidity. He concedes that, whilst thinking cannot be reduced to a skill, it shares some of its characteristics in that it can be taught, improved and that some people are more adept at it than others. Both McGuinness (1999) and Kite (2000) link the creation of ‘good thinking’ habits with an appropriate learning environment, relating the success of the development of higher quality thinking to the use of methods in the classroom that encourage the disposition to think as well as the acquisition of thinking strategies. My reading made me realise that the use of traditional thinking skills programmes would not necessarily lead to the kind of *thoughtfulness* I was looking for.

I wanted to design an artefact that would help the students to remember the elements of thoughtfulness. I devised a ‘thoughtfulness’ key fob to which I attached ten cardboard labels. Each label represented a ‘key’ to an aspect of the deliberate structured thinking process that I wanted students to use. The keys were based on some of De Bono’s (1981) CoRT programme tools. Some keys were used to broaden initial thinking and widen the perspectives from which students approach tasks. This gave them scope to demonstrate knowledge and understanding and the application of skills; a secure base on which to build their analysis and evaluation skills. Others would encourage analysis and evaluation through comparison, contrast, selectivity, judgement and justification. I hoped the tangible key fob would provide an easy reminder of the keys; that it would act as a prompt to students to stop and think before they write and give students a sense of ownership in the project.

Working with the thoughtfulness key fob

My aim was to explore the use of the key fob to promote thoughtfulness in the classroom. I also wanted to investigate its impact on middle-ability students in developing habits of thoughtfulness and the ability to link thoughtfulness to the skills of analysis and evaluation. I chose to focus on a class taught by a colleague, an experienced and established teacher. The class teacher’s views resonated with mine and she was willing to act as a reflective partner in my research. I began to keep a research diary in which I recorded the progress of the project, noting down critical incidents, issues and feelings as they arose.

Although the intervention was to be used with the whole class, I decided to focus on a sample comprising the nine middle-ability students with between 5.3 and 6.3 average GCSE points profiles and MTGs for A2 Level in the range B/C to C/D. We carried out some pre-intervention activities during December 2004 once the class teacher had established a good relationship with the class. Students were asked to assess a number of statements adapted from Sternberg's (1997) list of learning strategies and constraints. This allowed me to establish the degree to which the sample group matched the middle-ability profile I had identified.

The class teacher and I then reflected on a tape-recording and observation notes of the class attempting an exam-style task. We were both stunned at what had happened. Whilst one group, led by the higher-ability students, forged ahead with the task, the sample group sat in silence for almost twenty minutes with no evidence of them underlining key words or annotating or coding the text. It was clear that they found it difficult to start the thinking and planning process. We agreed that had we been doing the question with them we would have been instructing them '*underline this word because it tells us...*' and '*here is an important point - mark that bit of text*'. Their only creative idea, when one student suggested they should listen to and copy the other group, simply affirmed their passivity and their desire to be spoon-fed. I realised that as teachers we often do the thinking for them without signposting how we are doing it. They obey instructions, not recognising the instructions as tools nor assimilating them.

In January 2005 the class teacher handed out the key fobs and began to introduce the keys (see Appendix 1). We had intended that they should be introduced through a series of worksheets, one per lesson, over a period of three weeks. I had selected worksheets which were most appropriate for sixteen to seventeen year olds and, where possible, had some business relevance from a scheme called Think Before You Act (Hymans, 2003). She would then continue to model the use of the tools in class (Kite, 2000); to make links between the tools to particular tasks in the classroom and to show how they could be used in combination providing a scaffold for their use (Leat, 1998). She would gradually incorporate them into her own lesson planning for the remaining six weeks of the Spring Term. Wanting the keys to be accessible ultimately to students without dependence on the teacher, I asked her to encourage students to talk about and use the key fob both individually and collaboratively. I also wanted students to refer to specific aspects of deliberate thinking and to call the keys by their acronyms; for example 'doing a FIP' or 'using a PMI' to enable them to develop a language for exploring, discussing and reflecting on thoughtfulness thereby creating a shared vocabulary for use in the classroom (McGuiness, 1999).

I asked the students to keep 'open' diaries during the intervention to capture contemporaneously the introduction and use of the key fob. I tried to reduce the burden of responsibility that diaries would place on the students (Robson, 2002) by providing exemplar pages and by emphasising the collaborative nature of the project.

Unexpected timetable changes in January meant that the teaching of the class became shared with a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT). For various reasons, and despite my reminders, the diaries and worksheets were not taken into class and the keys were not introduced or used consistently. Being thrown into the project unexpectedly I wondered if the NQT was ambivalent about the worth of the thoughtfulness project and

that this attitude was being transmitted to the students. I later discovered that although he had made some effort to incorporate some of the keys into his lesson planning, he had been put off by student resistance to the diaries which they said were ‘tedious’ and ‘an imposition on their subject-matter learning time’. Although many of the comments were brief, giving little scope for detailed interpretation of the thinking behind them, I analysed the diaries, producing for each an A4 sheet to summarise its contents. By colour coding and annotating each sheet I identified that students’ use of the key fob had broadened their thinking and encouraged selectivity. It was also possible to discern the kind of difficulties that students had with the way the key fob thoughtfulness tools were introduced.

With only four weeks of term left I was seriously worried about the project’s sustainability. Therefore I decided to introduce the key fob to my own teaching group to allow me to investigate the flaws of the key fob at first hand. I approached this with a one-session introduction, explaining the nature of each key and relating them to examination skills. I then asked my class to use them in a task and to give me feedback. As this group’s reaction was very positive I intervened with the other class and pushed through the last few keys before their mock AS examinations.

Post-intervention, I recorded and transcribed interviews with the sample group of students using my analysis of their diary entries to scaffold the questions in my semi-structured schedule (Munn and Drever, 1995). I was able to confirm and clarify some of their comments and investigate further their ability to link thoughtfulness to the skills of analysis and evaluation. I was very surprised when their responses indicated a change in attitude towards the key fob. I discussed my findings with my colleagues in order to reflect on why this had happened. I then asked the students to complete anonymously a short questionnaire comprising simple closed questions to confirm their views, independent of the interview data and my presence.

What I learnt

The evidence from the interview and questionnaire data suggested the students now appreciated the need to use a structured approach to thinking before acting or writing and found some benefit from using the ‘thoughtfulness key fob’. Most students regretted their early resistance which seemed to stem from three issues extraneous to the key fob itself: the timing of the intervention; the manner in which it was introduced and the fact that students did not at first see clear links between the intervention and their subject-learning.

Their views on thoughtfulness appeared to be more sophisticated than those expressed during the pre-intervention tasks; they recognised the value of how to do things rather than just to know things and could link deliberate structured thinking to the examination skills of analysis and evaluation. I interpreted this as students beginning to identify themselves as ‘thinkers’ (Kite, 2000) and valuing the trait of thoughtfulness (Shrag, 1988). The fact that some students had used the keys in their mock examination paper at the end of the term was particularly promising.

Despite my reading I had underestimated the challenge in changing student attitudes towards thinking (Burden, 1987; Blagg, 1991) and the extent to which a degree of co-operative collaboration in the classroom is paramount to the success of an intervention.

I learnt more from these problems than I would have done had the project run smoothly. This has already begun to shape my practice for other teaching and learning interventions.

I am aware that my data does not allow me to generalise beyond my own classroom context and that my claim that the intervention has merit is merely relateable rather than generalisable (Bassey, 1999). The key fob is clearly not the only solution, but it appears to have the potential to prompt the kind of deliberate and structured thinking I had in mind. Middle-ability students not only benefited from an improved ability to think for themselves but also drew on this in examination questions, finding the skills of analysis and evaluation more accessible.

Was it worth it?

The project has had a positive impact on the way we collaborate, share and support each other in the department. We have become a more cohesive force in our attempt to raise achievement in middle-ability students. In spite of the difficulties, I believe I have successfully implemented change and extended the ethos of collaboration (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000). The project enabled me to illuminate an issue that fed into discussions in a whole-school professional development day on thinking skills and thoughtfulness. Whilst I am still using the 'thoughtfulness key fob', I am at present concentrating on 'teacher signposting' (the words we use and the models we set) and examining further the constraints on thoughtfulness.

In this project I tried to avoid the usual pitfalls of teacher action research (Somekh, 1995). It is imperative neither to work alone nor to become too introspective about one's research, but instead to engage in collaborative partnership with colleagues. I have also learnt that it is necessary to bear in mind that a project should be conducted in a manner that allows the dissemination of findings, makes a difference in the classroom and generates enthusiasm in others. There is no doubt that classroom research is demanding, especially when you are full-time teacher and possibly have additional responsibilities such as Head of Department, but the intellectual challenge has not only helped me to develop a vision for my students but has also enriched my professional practice (Desforges, 1989). I hope that by sharing my own experiences I might encourage other teachers to engage in classroom research.

References

- Bassey, M. (1999) *Case Study Research in Educational Settings*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Blagg, N. (1991) *Can we teach intelligence? A Comprehensive Evaluation of Feuersteins's Instrumental Enrichment Programme*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Burden, R.L. (1987) 'Feuersteins's Instrumental Enrichment Programme: Important issues in Research and Evaluation'. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*. 2(1), 3-16.
- De Bono, E. (1981) *CoRT – 1 Thinking*. Oxford.: Pergamon.
- Desforges, C. (1989) 'Understanding learning for teaching.' *Westminster Studies in Education*. 12, 17 – 29.
- Hymans, M. (2003) *Think Before You Act*. Bristol: Lucky Duck Publishing.
- Kite, A. (2000) *A guide to better thinking: teachers guide*. London: nferNelson.

- Leat, D. (1998) *Thinking through Geography*. Cambridge: Chris Kington Publishing.
- McGuiness, C. (1999) *From Thinking Skills to Thinking Classrooms: a review and evaluation of approaches for developing pupils' thinking*. DfEE Research Report 115. London: DfES.
- Mitchell, C. & Sackney, L. (2000). *Profound improvement: Building capacity for a learning community*. Lisse, NL: Swets & Zeitlinger.
- Munn, P. & Drever, E. (1995) *Using Questionnaires in Small Scale Research*. Edinburgh: SCRE.
- Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research*. (2nd Edition) Oxford: Blackwell.
- Shrag, F. (1988) *Thinking in School and Society*. London: Routledge.
- Somekh, B. (1995) The Contribution of Action Research to Development in Social Endeavours: a position paper on action research methodology. *British Educational Research Journal* 21(3), 339-55.
- Sternberg, R.J. (1997) *Thinking Styles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix

Table of keys to deliberate thinking

Consider All Factors (CAF): an attention-directing tool encouraging students to identify and list all factors that might have some relevance to the issues in their classroom task or examination question.

Alternatives Possibilities Choices (APC): an attention-directing tool to increase detail in the thought process by asking students to identify parallel possibilities.

Other Peoples' Views (OPV): this broadens perception in two ways by encouraging students to consider both sides of an argument and by developing their sense of objectivity.

Consequences & Sequel (C&S): a tool to encourage students to look at consequences in terms of benefits, costs and risks relating to three key issues: timescale (immediate, short-term, medium-term and long-term); risk (best and worst case scenario); and certainty.

Plus Minus Interesting (PMI): a scanning tool can be used for a single idea or to assess a number of alternatives. All Plus points are identified before the Minus points and only after that should Interesting points be searched for. This tool can be used at a number of stages of the task: to assess initial issues; to analyse solutions; to evaluate conclusions; and to justify decisions.

Aims Goals Objectives (AGO): an attention-directing tool to encourage thinking about focus and purpose.

First Important Priorities (FIP): a parallel-thinking tool that is used to narrow down a wide list of ideas. I chose it to guide students in measuring the value of alternatives when making decisions.

Key Values Involved (KVI): the notion of key values introduces some selectivity into the generative thinking process. Students require an ability to identify whose values need to be considered, what those values are and then to identify the key values which take precedence.

Compare: a tool to be used in conjunction with others to bring in a further element of selectivity, encouraging students to weigh up factors, options, and solutions.

Decisions: a tool to identify three possible decision problems: where one has no idea what to do; where one has only one idea which may not be sufficient; and where one has a number of ideas but cannot choose between them.