

## Debbie Davies' Development Work: Developing a 'Learning to Learn' course at The Highfield School, Letchworth

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Debbie Davies teaches at The Highfield School, a Leading Edge School with an ethos which promotes the development of teachers as reflective practitioners. She participated in the Certificate in Teaching and Learning course at Hertfordshire Development Centre in 2004-05 and, at the time of writing, co-leads a Teacher Led Development Work group which serves schools in Letchworth.

Debbie had visited Two Waters Primary School and was inspired. All teachers at Two Waters are trained in De Bono's Thinking Skills approach to pedagogy and practice. Debbie was particularly impressed by the children's ability to discuss their own learning. She decided to develop a Learning to Learn course at The Highfield School in the hope that it would promote independent learning.

Her reading of the literature on independent learning strengthened Debbie's resolve and helped her think about the ways in which a Learning to Learn course might impact on students' independence as learners. She was encouraged by the argument that the ability to think and learn independently should be valued above all else, despite the fact that the current national focus on achievement tends to lead to a view of learning which emphasises the acquisition of knowledge (Stoll, Fink and Earl, 2003). A compilation of recent research in which schools had experimented with Learning to Learn approaches was also encouraging. Many schools reported positively on the programme with raised standards, motivation and morale being cited as indicators of potential impact (Greany and Rodd, 2003).

Debbie discussed her ideas with members of her school's Leadership Team. It was agreed that she would write a ten week Learning to Learn course which would be operate as part of the Year 7 Personal and Social Education course. She designed her Learning to Learn course by looking at other courses, for example one written about by Burnett (2002), and Alistair Smith's 'Accelerated Learning in Practice' programme. Her course included:

- Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Wheel and questionnaire
- De Bono's Thinking Hats
- memory techniques
- how the brain works
- Brain Gym
- Mind-maps
- Emotional Intelligence

She chose resources that she thought would be suitable for her Year 7 students. The aim was to enable the students to become independent learners by raising their self-

esteem, helping them to know more about how they learn best and teaching them the skills to become better learners.

Debbie wanted to evaluate this and assess the impact of the course on the extent to which students are able to learn independently. She summarised her areas of interest in the following questions.

- Did students feel more confident to attempt tasks alone after following the Learning to Learn course?
- Did students now have a wider range of learning strategies that they could use in subjects across the curriculum?

She focused on a small group of Year 7 students and used a number of ways of collecting data to help her to understand the impact of the Learning to Learn course. Student interviews demonstrated that students were more confident in working independently when they had a choice of task. Lesson observations conducted by Debbie gave her further information on the degree to which students had developed independent learning strategies. A log of learning strategies was also used by Debbie to show the range of strategies used by the students.

Group interviews with students confirmed Debbie's view that students were able to transfer their learning strategies to subjects across the curriculum and to work undertaken at home. She also found that confidence levels among students were considerably boosted by having a degree of independence in the learning process.

Debbie felt that the importance of student ownership of the learning process was confirmed by her project. Students clearly articulated their wish to continue to practice their new-found skills across the curriculum. They similarly emphasised the importance of having a choice of learning activity. This allowed them to practice their independent learning skills and thus increase their confidence. It is interesting to note that some students felt that a potential barrier to their development in this area was a lack of opportunity for independent learning in some of their lessons. Debbie rightly raises this as an issue to be addressed.

Following this evaluation Debbie was able to revise and improve the scheme of work for her Learning to Learn course.

She then turned her attention to strategies for supporting more teachers in developing both their understanding of independent learning and their inclusion of a choice of activity in their lesson plans in order to scaffold the development of students as independent learners.

## **References**

- Burnett, G. (2002) *Learning to Learn*. Carmarthen: Crownhouse.
- Greany, T. & Rodd, J. (2003) *Creating a Learning to Learn School*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.
- Stoll, L., Fink, D. & Earl, L. (2003) *It's About Learning: Its About Time*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.