

Andrew Whiteway's Development Work
**Developing students' independent approach
to understanding poetry**
at The Barclay School, Stevenage

Andrew was a 'newly qualified teacher' at a secondary school when he began his development work. When he stopped to reflect on his professional values he realised that, although he believed that helping students to become independent learners should be a key focus of a teacher's work, his actual approach to the teaching of poetry with his older students did not reflect these beliefs. He wanted to explore ways to change his practice.

Andrew began by asking his colleagues in the English department to give him one word to describe their experience of teaching poetry at Key Stage 4. The words chosen by the teachers demonstrated that they enjoyed it, and were excited by it, but their students did not appear to share this enthusiasm.

Andrew began to look for new strategies to increase both students' enjoyment of poetry and their ability to talk and write about it. For him the key would be to develop their independence as learners of poetry. He used a list of 'qualities of the independent learner', developed by his colleagues during a staff development day, to analyse his current methods of teaching poetry. The list below includes some examples.

Independent learners are:

- willing to take risks
- confident in themselves
- able to make decisions
- prepared to take action
- creative thinkers
- well organised
- able to collaborate
- reflective and self-aware

He then planned an extended homework project, designed to broaden and deepen students' understanding of poetry and to develop their ability to give a personal response to it. Students' responses to the homework project helped Andrew to plan a series of lessons which encouraged the qualities he and his colleagues had identified. He decided not to use the poems specified on the examination syllabus in this series of lessons. Instead, he talked with his colleagues about the poets they thought would entertain, engage and challenge students. Armed with this list, Andrew selected poems that he would use in the series of lessons he was planning.

Having developed a series of lesson plans featuring the poems he had selected, Andrew tested out some of the activities through a workshop with his colleagues. The discussion he led focused on the difference between helping students to understand pre-determined meanings and helping them to formulate and explore their own meanings. He gave his colleagues some of the poetry-related tasks he had designed for his students.

Possible tasks for students:

- Provide a dramatic reading of one of the poems, focusing on communicating the message of the poem in a new and original way.
- Use a multimedia program such as Windows Moviemaker; produce the poem as a small movie, selecting images, key quotes and appropriate music.
- Try and reinterpret one of the poems as a different 'text' – a short story perhaps, or a diary entry.

The reaction of colleagues, their comments and insights helped Andrew to complete the planning of his series of lessons.

Andrew then began to teach his poetry module. He used some unusual stimulus material to help students to engage with the poetry on a personal level, capturing their attention and stimulating their imaginations (Egan, 1992; Hughes, 2001). He used music with themes similar to those in the poems. He also appealed to visual learners through using well-known pieces of art, for example, Edward Munch's 'Scream', to try to draw connections between emotions and poetry. To help students to develop their skills as

independent learners, Andrew acted as facilitator rather than teacher and gave instructions that were open to interpretation. Students were supported in finding meanings in the poem rather than being expected to learn the analysis provided by the teacher.

Andrew asked students what they thought of this approach. Generally, they reported that their levels of confidence had risen in the course of the project, although he was surprised that many of his students expressed a preference for teacher-led, 'traditional' approaches to the teaching of poetry. He subsequently read another teacher's account of innovation in which there was a similar response from students when challenged by the expectation of learning more independently (Newbrook, 2007). An unexpected and welcome outcome of Andrew's project was the development of students' abilities to comment on their learning in response to his questions. Students were able to articulate what helped them to learn. They were also able to share the reasoning process which had led them to their views, as shown in the example below.

I prefer a mixture of both. The independent lessons allowed me to use my own techniques to interpret the poems. The studying lessons also strengthened my thought and aided my understanding.

This development work gave Andrew a taste for leading the development of students' abilities as independent learners. He resolved to continue to work collaboratively with colleagues to develop this further. A key challenge for the future was to find ways to address the problem of some students' preference for dependency.

Following the completion of this project, Andy enrolled for the HertsCam MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning which provided the support for his next project focusing on the use of multi-media in the classroom. During the second year of his masters programme, Andy was appointed to the post of Head of Media Studies at another school.

References

- Egan, K. (1992) *Imagination in teaching and learning: ages 8 to 15*. London: Routledge.
- Hughes, M. (2001) *Closing the Learning Gap*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.
- Newbrook, L. (2007) Developing independent learning in Year 12 English. *Teacher Leadership*, 1(3), 62-4.