

Lorna Newbrook's Development Work: **Developing independent learning in Year 12 English** at The Highfield School, Letchworth

Lorna Newbrook was responsible for A level English Language and Literature at The Highfield School when she carried out her development project. Although teachers appreciate the importance of enabling students to think and work independently in preparation for higher education and the world of work, an overfull curriculum often pressures them into leading the students more than they would like to. Lorna was interested in helping her own Year 12 students to develop more active and independent approaches to their studies.

During the previous academic year, Lorna had attended an 'Independent Learning Toolbox' professional development session at her own school. This was a session in which teachers shared their knowledge and expertise on ways to encourage independent learning. Inspired by this session, Lorna reviewed the materials and websites mentioned by her colleagues. She was particularly interested in the concept of the 'Learning Pyramid' (Petty, 2004) which models students' rate of recall when information is presented using various teaching strategies. Other research showing the impact of active learning also excited her (Hattie, 1999). Lorna decided to try to include active learning with her Year 12 English group, focusing on the two novels studied for the A level examination: *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

Lorna began her project by explaining to her students that they would be exploring a variety of methods of learning. They were interested from the outset and ready to collaborate with her to evaluate these. Lorna began by asking her students about their preferred ways of learning. She was surprised that most of her students preferred the more traditional ways of learning such as systematically reading through a text and taking notes, as opposed to group work, discussion and a variety of reading and writing activities.

Bearing these reactions in mind, she began gently. She introduced independent learning activities in the order below:

- summarising chapters of the novels at home and adding further details in class
- performing important sections of the novels to develop the students' engagement with the text
- analysing short sections through discussion and annotation
- making paired presentations of sections analysed to the class
- designing a representation of the scarlet letter worn by the heroine as a sign of adultery
- undertaking a homework task to analyse the text independently and respond to exam questions
- group work with groups initially established by Lorna and later by the students themselves
- preparing a section of an exam answer in a small group and feeding back to the class using whiteboards
- using mind maps and flow charts to explore themes and characters.

During the lessons Lorna was alert to the students' responses, supporting both those who appeared ill at ease or unmotivated and those who appeared more confident. At the end of the project, Lorna gave the students a simple feedback tool, inviting them to review the strategies they had encountered. She then followed up the comments with personal interviews.

As expected, the tasks which involved students in art work or presentations were approached diffidently by the shy students and those who were conventional learners. The pair presentations were seen by most students as constructive learning activities but the presentations were deemed too time-consuming to be of benefit to some students. The mind map and flow chart activities were viewed to be constructive as were the practice essay tasks. A significant number of students found it supportive to collaborate in essay writing but not all students were convinced of the value of working on the whiteboards. The most visual and kinaesthetic learners were unreservedly enthusiastic about all the activities.

Lorna learnt a great deal from this and wanted to build on it. She wanted to focus on being more explicit about the skills she aimed to develop when setting up an activity with students, whilst at the same time encouraging the students to value thinking and discussion more

highly. Towards the end of her project she discovered Mike Royston's book *Finding a Voice: A Personal Response to A Level English* and discovered there strategies that would help her extend her repertoire further.

Lorna shared the materials and ideas she had developed with colleagues and discussed the project at department meetings. Having clarified her thinking about how to support independent learning, she entered into discussions with colleagues in other departments, particularly RE and Psychology, with a view to planning some collaboration.

References

Hattie, J. A. (1999) Influences on student learning. Inaugural professorial lecture: University of Auckland <http://www.arts.auckland.ac.nz/staff/index.cfm>,

Petty, G. (2004) *Teaching Today: a practical guide* (3rd edition). Nelson Thornes: Cheltenham.

Royston, M. (1998) *Finding a Voice: A Personal Response to A Level English*. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes.