

Claire Simmons' development work
**Using 'Think' questions to improve
participation and thinking skills**
at Dame Alice Owen's School, Potters Bar

At the time Claire initiated her 'Thunks' project she was a History teacher with a special responsibility as 'Head of Student Progress' for Year 12 (16-17 yr olds). She had become aware that many of these students were either unable, or perhaps unwilling, to take responsibility for their own learning; they seemed unable to think independently. She wanted to develop a more participative approach to learning and help students develop their thinking skills so that they might become more independent learners.

The term 'independent learning' has been, and continues to be, the subject of debate. The Department for Education and Skills provided some guidance in their 'Vision 2020' report.

Learners are active and curious: they create their own hypotheses, ask their own questions, coach one another, set goals for themselves, monitor their progress and experiment with ideas for taking risks, knowing that mistakes and 'being stuck' are part of learning.

(DfES, 2006: 6)

Claire identified that one of the main obstacles to students becoming independent learners is that they do not always see the relevance or significance of what it is that they are being asked to learn. She read an article about teaching and learning in History by Doreen Tan (2004) who criticized the tendency to rely on teaching from textbooks which seem to represent 'a body of knowledge that is cast in concrete' (p. 197). This results in students not being expected to interpret material or form their own opinions about it. She decided to experiment with new methods to help students develop the skills to construct knowledge for themselves and make better sense of the subject of History, in particular to be able to analyse, synthesise and evaluate.

She came across 'The Little Book of Thunks' by Ian Gilbert which contained 260 questions on a wide range of topics that most

importantly have no definitive answer. A 'Thunk' is defined in Gilbert's book like this.

A 'Thunk' is a beguiling question about everyday things that stops you in your tracks and helps you start to look at the world in a whole new light.

(Gilbert, 2007: 3)

The book gave Claire a vehicle to develop strategies for independent thinking. By posing questions without any definitive answers, students would be enticed into thinking for themselves.

She started by consulting the students and explaining how Thunks could be used. She gave examples, some of which were related to History.

Is democracy an elected dictatorship?
Is the future closer today than it was yesterday?
Can you have a friend you don't like?

She planned a series of Thunk sessions and made a wall display for the classroom which illustrated different types of questions. Another teacher who used the same classroom was inspired by the display and started to use Thunks in his lessons. Claire was pleased with the display but afterwards thought that it could have had more impact if it had been in a more public place and made accessible to a wider range of staff.

Claire drew colleagues into her development work by consulting members of the History Department and by making a presentation about her work at a whole staff meeting. She led a workshop at a HertsCam Network Event and found it helpful to hear how people from other schools had used Thunks. This helped her to think about how to increase the impact of her project.

To review the process and assess the impact of Thunks, Claire filmed sessions and carried out interviews. She found that students were becoming more able or disposed to think and go beyond the information given to them; they enjoyed using Thunks that related to their studies but also to issues in their own lives. Here are some of their comments:

*Because Thunks have no definite answers you can contribute anything you like without worrying that you may be wrong.
It's great to discuss random things which you might not have thought of before and they stimulate your thinking; its good to listen to other people's perspective on things.*

Claire's enquiries indicated that students' were enjoying intellectual challenges, arguing, expressing their opinion and dealing with uncertainty. She felt there was a culture shift towards a more collaborative, participatory approach to learning and concluded that using Thunks had an impact on the way the students define intelligence; moving away from simply remembering information towards a wider range of intellectual skills.

Leadership is a key element of the School Improvement Plan at Claire's school and there is considerable encouragement for the development of leadership amongst staff at all levels. Claire was invited to attend a meeting of the Senior Leadership Team and was able to explain the impact of her project on her practice as well as on the students and other staff; it was also mentioned in the Governors' Report.

Through this project Claire had identified a wide range of other ways that Thunks could be used. She wanted to build on her success and explore strategies such as those listed below.

- A Thunk Club starting with Year 12 students
- Thunks to be built into Form Time (tutorial sessions)
- A 'Thunk of the Week' to be made available to members of staff.
- Developing a 'Thunk Pack' for staff

She also planned to collaborate with Advanced Skills Teachers to look at how Thunks could be used more widely.

Since completing her project, Claire continued to use Thunks extensively in her lessons with excellent results. She led professional development sessions for the History department and introduced Thunks into schemes of work. She contributed Thunks sessions to the Personalised Learning Programme for colleagues and has shared teaching guidelines during staff briefing meetings. Thunk books have been bought and distributed amongst staff. Claire has also made a variety of resources including wall displays and laminated Thunk sheets. She has introduced a Thunks approach to

tutorial sessions for post-16 students because they are a useful preparation for university interviews, amongst other things. Following this project, Claire joined the HertsCam masters programme and, at the time of writing, is pursuing further development work focused on independent learning.

References

Department for Education and Skills (2006) *2020 Vision: The Report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group*. Nottingham: DFES.

Gilbert, I. (2007) *The Little Book of Thunks*. Wales: Crown House Publishing.

Tan, D. (2004) What is History Teaching and Learning? *Teaching and Learning*, 25(2), 197-206.