

Lee Wells' Development Work: Scaffolding extended writing to raise student attainment at Barnwell School, Stevenage

Lee Wells was a member of the joint Barnwell/Barclay schools Teacher Led Development Work group in 2005-6 when he had been teaching for just one year.

Lee wanted to develop ways to support his low ability Year 10 students in completing extended writing tasks, as part of their GCSE⁸ English work. He began his development work by asking his Year 10 students to share their views on their learning in English. Lee was disappointed that this discussion was dominated by a few vocal students, with others not having a real opportunity to contribute. He did form the view, however, that students' self-belief was low which rendered them incapable of undertaking the type of writing required. In order to give all students the chance to express their views, Lee asked them to complete a questionnaire which indicated that, although their self-belief was low, they still had the desire to succeed; they simply did not know how to go about it.

One of the obstacles to developing writing seemed to be the emphasis of the outcome – the product – rather than on the process of writing as others had found (e.g. Bates, 1990). In GCSE English classes Lee noted that more time seemed to be spent on task completion than on cognitive development. He read a teacher's account of having used a structured approach to writing (Fones, 2001) which he then experimented with but abandoned because it did not suit his own students. It was a helpful step, however. He then decided to try building on a strength exhibited by the students – their oral work. Members of the Year 10 group were able to answer complex questions verbally, provided that Lee broke them down into smaller, closed questions to structure their thinking. He adapted this to structure the writing tasks he set his students.

⁸ GCSE: see footnote 3 in Sonia Tuner's story

Lee focused on three coursework assignments. He decided to investigate what would happen if he scaffolded the first coursework assignment very heavily and gradually withdrew his support over the next two pieces. He hoped that students' independent writing skills would be enhanced. He began by putting a series of questions on one half of the board to help his students to undertake Assignment 1. The students were asked to build up the answers to these questions into paragraphs, and the paragraphs into a completed assignment. On the other half of the board, Lee wrote outline statements to guide the students' writing.

Lee had hoped that students would move from using the very structured scaffolding provided on one half of the board to the more general guide provided on the other once their confidence and writing skills developed. In fact, few students made the necessary cognitive leap; most of them remained heavily reliant on the structured questions to guide their writing. Discussions with students told Lee that that they were happier with their work and that their levels of self-confidence had grown but this did not seem to be leading to greater independence in extended writing.

Reflecting on the insights he gained from his development work, Lee decided to research different types of accredited Key Stage 4 courses for low ability students in English. He found that the AQA⁹ specification for the Entry Level Certificate scaffolds tasks in a very structured way and allows for cognitive development. This enables students to achieve a GCSE. Lee felt that this might, therefore, be appropriate for some low ability students. This course was introduced by Barnwell School in September 2006 with Lee leading it and continuing his development work through it.

At the end of the project, Lee had discussions with colleagues from different areas of the curriculum and it was at this point that he became aware that his development work was more widely relevant than he had previously realised. It became clear that his work could make an important contribution to the school's understanding of teaching and learning. This was an important realisation that enabled Lee to extend his development work by collaborating with colleagues to explore cross-curricular links. His final reflection at the conclusion of his portfolio underlines this commitment to

⁹ The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) is the largest of the three English exam boards. It sets and marks public exams such as GCSEs and A Levels, as well as other qualifications.

exploring the possibilities of this development work for whole-school impact.

References

Bates, R. (1990) 'Looking at writing and learning - and how they develop together' in The National Writing Project, *Ways of Looking*. Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson.

Fones, D. (2001) Blocking them in to free them to act: Using writing frames to shape boys' responses to literature in the secondary school, *English in Education* 35(3) Autumn 2001.