

Elizabeth Clarey's Development Work: Enhancing learning in English using De Bono's 'Thinking Hats' strategy at The Highfield School, Letchworth

Elizabeth Clarey was in the unusual position of being both a newly qualified teacher and Head of Year 7 when she undertook this teaching and learning project in 2004. She had joined the Certificate in Teaching and Learning based at the Hertfordshire Development Centre along with several other colleagues at The Highfield School. Highfield is a school where reflective practice is encouraged and where great strides have been taken in the development of teaching and learning.

Early on in the certificate course Elizabeth became interested in looking at ways of enhancing students' learning through developing their thinking skills, so she read some of De Bono's work (1990) which seemed to offer ways to help students structure their thinking.

The Thinking Hats strategy supports students' thinking by using the metaphor of wearing different hats to signify different thinking tasks. There are six hats.

White Hat thinking: With this hat on you focus on the available data such as dates, facts and quantities. You try to interpret the facts and identify the gaps in the data.

Red Hat thinking: With this hat on you use your gut reactions, intuition and emotions. You also try to focus on imagining other people's emotional reactions.

Black Hat thinking: With this hat on you look at the problem cautiously and defensively. You try to spot the weaknesses in your argument.

Yellow Hat thinking: With this hat on you take an optimistic standpoint focussing on the positive benefits of whatever it is you are arguing for.

Green Hat thinking: With this hat on you focus on creativity and unrestrained problem solving.

Blue Hat thinking: With this hat on you are encouraged to think about thinking itself, metacognition in other words.

The basic theory behind Thinking Hats is that dividing thinking into separate areas makes it easier to think, allowing you to concentrate on one thought process, or Thinking Hat, at any one time. It is claimed that this helps you to think clearly and prevents confusion (De Bono, 1990).

Elizabeth decided to use an existing English scheme of work that requires students to research animal testing and to write a discursive essay based on what they had found out. She planned to use the Thinking Hats strategy and explore the extent to which the students themselves found this way of working helpful. She began by constructing her own lesson plans using the processes suggested in De Bono's book 'Teach your child

how to think' (1992). She chose to work with a focus group of Year 8 mixed ability students. She asked them to keep a journal of each lesson, recording the activities they had undertaken during the lesson and their feelings about how these activities had helped them to learn. Elizabeth decided to interview these students to ensure that she fully understood their views. Video recordings of the interviews allowed her to reflect on what the students had said later on.

Elizabeth taught her students how to use De Bono's Thinking Hats. Each lesson focussed on a contrasting pair of Thinking Hats: for example the red hat that involves very subjective and intuitive type of thinking and the white hat which demands the processing of more factual information. She used various activities from De Bono's book to help students to put the hats into use. Students were, for example, presented with leaflets and information from various sources on the topic of animal testing. They were asked to highlight the information in various colours to show the different types of thinking evident. They experimented with using a new page for each Thinking Hat in their exercise book and made notes on the appropriate page.

When the students had used all of the hats, they discussed how, by using the thinking which took place under each hat as a new section, they could arrange their thoughts into the discursive essay which they had been asked to write.

Elizabeth was able to use evidence from her explorations to initiate discussions with other colleagues across the school. She was able to share a number of insights:

- Year 8 students found using Thinking Hats helpful in supporting their learning
- students' confidence levels rose, because using the hats emphasised that thinking does not depend on producing an answer that is right or wrong
- students' ability to work independently seemed to be enhanced

This project has influenced Elizabeth's own work in a number of ways. It enabled her to learn more about what thinking involves. She had also discovered a new strategy which she can use to scaffold students' learning, particularly when they are faced with the more complex writing tasks. She also learnt about the power of teacher-led development work for improving both teacher and student learning. Elizabeth's work contributed to a school wide effort to raise the profile of learning through the sharing of good classroom practice and accounts of inquiry-led innovation.

References

De Bono, E. (1990) *Six Thinking Hats*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

De Bono, E. (1992) *Teach your child how to think*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.