Tom Murphy's Development Work:
Students as teachers
at Sir John Lawes School, Harpenden

Tom Murphy was a member of the Teacher Led Development Work group at Sir John Lawes School between 2005 and 2006. Although Tom was only in his first year of teaching, his development work was to have an extraordinary degree of impact in the school and beyond. At the conclusion of his project he was invited to give the opening keynote address at the whole staff professional development day. So what was it that had led to this?

Tom's thinking had been influenced by Albert Bandura's ideas about self-efficacy and social learning (1976, 1985, 2002) which he read when he did his PGCE[10] (initial teacher training course). He subsequently recognised these ideas in the practical guidance put forward by Paul Ginnis in 'The Teacher's Toolkit' (Ginnis, 2001). He became convinced that the students themselves could exercise influence over each other in ways that teachers cannot. Like many teachers, Tom wanted the students to take more responsibility for their own learning and he wanted to explore whether it would be possible to cast them in the role of teacher as a way of realising this aim.

Tom knew that it would be a risky venture so he chose to experiment with a Year 11 class of moderately able students who presented no particular behavioural challenge and with whom he enjoyed a good relationship. He divided them into small groups each of which was asked to take responsibility for teaching a lesson. They were given the learning objectives for the lesson and a week to devise a plan. Tom met with each group during the lunchtime to review their lesson plans. These meetings sometimes included a rehearsal of practical demonstrations.

Once the plans had been agreed Tom resolved to restrict his role to that of observer and camera operator. The students took complete responsibility for the teaching of the lessons. At first this was extremely challenging; students were not used to listening to each

---

[10] PGCE: The on year post-graduate initial teacher training course

other and it was tempting to intervene, but Tom remained unavailable for questions or any other response usually expected of the teacher. After initial hesitations, the class began to work with the new scenario. Learning activity began to be more interactive with students getting up from their seats to examine resources and members of the teaching group circulating around the class to support fellow students' learning. Tom captured everything on video; this helped him to reflect on what had happened but it also enabled him to hide behind the camera and allow the students to shoulder all the responsibility.

These student-led lessons had a number of benefits. The innovation itself was captivating and drew the students into an explicit and purposeful discourse about learning. As might be expected, the level of empathy was high, so, for example, the students began to really listen. They listened not because an authority figure had demanded it of them but because they were assuming responsibility for the success of the learning process. Similarly, they became noticeably more questioning. Tom observed a significant shift in the classroom culture. One remarkable feature of this culture was the way students began to take notes without being asked to. They noted what they saw as important or puzzling and used their notes to pose questions.

There were a number of additional benefits that Tom had not predicted. One was the way he learned about new teaching techniques from the lessons the students planned and taught. For example, one teaching group used a technique they had experienced in a Modern Foreign Language lesson; it was an amusing activity that involved the students rushing forward and slapping a word or image that was mounted on the wall to indicate an answer to a problem. Tom had never seen this activity before but could immediately see how this could be used in science lessons. Here he was tapping into the pupils' knowledge about teaching and learning accumulated over many years of experience of a wide variety of lessons in all subjects. Another benefit was that, in preparing their lessons, the student teaching groups examined the range of software packages they found in the electronic resources cupboard and chose ones that were particularly useful. This was something the salaried teachers lacked the time to do.

Not all student-led lessons were successful of course. In the early stages, one teaching group had their fellow students copying notes from the board, but even this had hidden benefit. The feedback process that Tom had insisted they build into their lesson plans

enabled the other students to voice their views. They made it clear that they did not regard copying notes from the board as educative and it was agreed that this strategy would not feature in future lessons.

The assessment of the students' work subsequent to these student-led lessons indicated a higher than normal level of engagement with the subject matter, but what mattered more to Tom was that the feedback from the students suggested that they perceived themselves to be developing as independent learners and that they had become more effective as a learning community.

References

Bandura, A. (1976) *Social Learning Theory*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Bandura, A. (2002) *Self-Efficacy in Changing Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bandura, A. (1985) *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Ginnis, P. (2001) *Teacher's Toolkit: Raise Classroom Achievement with Strategies for Every Learner*, Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing.