Thinking for learning

Mel Rockett explains why so many schools in Northumberland have been inspired to adopt thinking skills strategies to raise standards

Our journey in Northumberland started in 1994 when a small group of Humanities teachers met with myself and David Leat of the University of Newcastle to consider the benefits of the Thinking Skills strategies which David and his PGCE students had developed. Some of these students were beginning to fill positions in Northumberland High Schools and word was reaching me of their impact in the classroom. Newcastle University's fifth column had arrived! This original core group of teachers included History, Geography and RE specialists, some NQTs and some more (some very much more) experienced professionals. They were interested in forming a network. I found a small budget for seed funding and we focussed on one strategy, *Mysteries*, in that first year. The results were collected in a report containing nine examples of mysteries, a strong desire to learn more together and more teachers wanting to join the group.

Today most Northumberland schools are involved (to some degree) in developing aspects of Thinking for Learning. In all of our 15 high Schools you will find some departments with a strong interest in Thinking Skills. In several there is a whole-school approach, sometimes in partnership with feeder middle and first schools. Well over a half of all the middle and first Schools in the county have strong links with the Thinking for Learning initiative. In this case Thinking Skills and Accelerated Learning approaches are supplemented by a belief in the impact of the

Philosophy for Children programme (Community of Enquiry) in raising pupils' self-esteem, aspiration and their ability to pose and answer complex questions.

So what is it that attracts so many schools and teachers to these approaches when they already feel overburdened with projects, initiatives and bureaucracy? There may be many reasons but I believe some key factors to be:

- Teachers feeling in control of their own professional development and pedagogy. They are supported and trained but there is an emphasis on their own role as evaluators, researchers and developers.
- The strategies work! Many teachers see an immediate impact in their classroom and are often surprised by the level of involvement and the high quality of thinking that comes from their pupils.
- The style of teaching involved is both challenging and rewarding. Some teachers have said it involves 'real teaching'. We would probably call it *mediation*. Helping learners to make sense of, and articulate, complex and often ambiguous situations helps teachers to recognise pupils' potential and to develop it.
- These teachers have been recognised and supported, their work celebrated by their own schools, the University and the LEA. They run workshops at dissemination conferences, contribute to network meetings and share their resources.

Kinds of approaches

It might be a good idea at this point to attempt to define what we in Northumberland mean by some of the terms I have been using.

Thinking for Learning: This is the generic term which we are using to encompass those initiatives which focus on how pupils' cognitive development can be supported. Whilst all learning involves thinking, these strategies put an emphasis on making that thinking explicit and open for discussion. John Abbot in his *book The Unfinished Revolution* encourages us to make the thinking process 'visible' whilst David Leat has referred to 'putting our brains on the table'. Within the umbrella term, 'Thinking for Learning', we would embrace Thinking Skills, Accelerated Learning, Philosophy For Children and, perhaps, Emotional Literacy.

Thinking skills: In Northumberland we have been most influenced by strategies developed by David Leat and his colleagues at the University of Newcastle. These strategies provide exciting and challenging vehicles for promoting thinking but, in addition, teachers point out and discuss the nature of the thinking itself – a process that makes the strategies even more effective. Thus mediation and de-briefing are essential aspects of the Newcastle approach. Published programmes such as *CASE, CAME, Let's Think (KS1), Somerset Thinking Skills* and *Top Ten Thinking Tactics* (KS2) would fall into this same definition and all are used to some degree in our schools.

Philosophy for Children: Philosophy for Children (P4C) was originally developed for pupils of elementary (primary) school age in the USA. The aim of this approach is to engage young people in meaningful, challenging and relevant discussion in order to help them to become more 'reasonable' – a characteristic which the author, Matthew Lipman, had noticed was often absent. The approach uses a 'Community of Enquiry' to stimulate discussion about interesting and relevant topics. Whilst used extensively in Northumberland's first and middle schools the technique has also been used by secondary teachers of humanities, science, PE, sociology and business studies to improve pupils' comprehension, interpretation and analysis, and language skills. Many KS3 teachers will say they don't have time for such lessons because there is so much content to cover. We have found that the benefits far outweigh the time costs if the approach is used sparingly and at relevant times. Some of our most successful teachers have adopted Philosophy for Children (or 'socratic debate').

Accelerated Learning: Unlike the previous approaches, Alistair Smith's 'Accelerated Learning Cycle' does not focus on explicit thinking but rather offers a whole paradigm for effective teaching and learning. Alistair's message has been received very well by most Northumberland teachers,

although many have struggled to translate the message into practice. At Cramlington High School, however, Accelerated Learning lessons have become the norm. We often see a relationship between Accelerated Learning and Thinking Skills because the Accelerated Learning Cycle provides the classroom climate in which Thinking Skills are likely to flourish whilst the Thinking Skills strategies add an element of cognitive challenge which is not necessarily present in all Accelerated Learning classrooms. Thinking Skills strategies and Philosophy for Children both require a flexible interpretation of Alistair's Accelerated Learning Cycle.

Why the success of Thinking for Learning?

How is it that Thinking for Learning has become so entrenched in Northumberland schools? I would like to tackle this at two levels, the LEA and the individual school, and then to consider a case study of how these combine in the case of one school. By generalising I will undoubtedly omit some specific instances and not all schools or teachers would fit easily into these patterns.

A collection of attitudes and opportunities have allowed us make progress with thinking for learning in Northumberland LEA. These are:

- Recognising **new ideas** that correspond with but extend existing beliefs about effective teaching and learning.
- Establishing and supporting **networks** of teachers or schools to develop new ideas further.
- Being open and pro-active in establishing **partnership** working with schools, other LEAs and institutions of higher education. In our case particularly the University of Newcastle and Sunderland LEA.
- Taking advantage of opportunities to provide, and subsidise **accredited** post-graduate courses, ie. **M.Ed** modules in Thinking Skills and Coaching.
- Making use of opportunities to engage teachers in reflective **action-research** – the **M.Ed** and **BPRS** (Best Practice Research Scholarships).
- Providing awareness-raising training days, using outside 'experts' such as Alistair Smith, or in-house and partners, eg **Thinking for Learning days** using LEA, school and University staff.
- Celebrating and disseminating teachers' and schools' work through LEA and regional **conferences.** Running workshops or contributing to written reports enhances teachers' self-esteem and professional skills.
- **Seeking** new areas of **funding** and working together with schools to produce bids, eg the **Berwick RAIS** Project (SRB: Single Regeneration Budget), the **Wansbeck Thinking for Learning** Project (NRF: Neighbourhood Renewal Fund).
- Developing or utilising **accredited courses** to recognise teachers' CPD, eg **Teaching Thinking Level 1** (LEA), **Philosophy For Children Level 1** (SAPERE) and **Critical Skills** (NEP).
- Providing **progression** for these basic **Level 1** courses to **Level 2 (Coach)** and **Level 3 (Trainer)** by utilising existing M.Ed. modules with some enhancements. (A similar structure is presently being discussed with Alistair Smith to provide Levels 1–3 in Accelerated Learning).

By using these various strategies we have grown from an interest group of half a dozen teachers to our present position where most of our schools and teachers have some knowledge and awareness of these various aspects of Thinking for Learning.

School leadership

Our experience tells us that the success of initiatives such as Thinking for Learning depend on thoughtful and supportive leadership. There also has to be a shared sense of ownership and belief in the initiative. Where Thinking Skills teaching emerges from the enthusiasm of individuals or small groups, it has a positive effect in a number of classrooms but rarely impacts on the rest of the school.

Isolated initiatives are likely to whither once those individuals move on, become worn down by lack of interest or side-tracked by other priorities. Equally, where a head or senior management team becomes enthused by the idea and seeks to impose it staff, resistance prevents effective implementation. You can't teach Thinking Skills mechanistically and without understanding and believing in which you are doing. What, then, seem to be the characteristics of successful initiatives? The following are most common:

- New ideas are introduced by any member of staff. (Including HT or SMT).
- Support and interest is gained from some other teaching staff.
- Senior Management supports and takes a sustained interest.
- Practical support is given including time, money or acknowledgement.
- Developments are planned according to expected outcomes.
- It is expected that some things won't work. This is seen as learning.
- Small scale tinkering is encouraged and discussed.
- Teaching and learning is a regular feature of discussion in both formal and informal settings.
- New learning about teaching is consolidated and adapted.
- Strategies are evaluated and, if effective, become expectations for all staff. Coaching and support are given to those who need it.

A case study

Doug is a PGCE graduate from the University of Newcastle. When he joined his Northumberland High School in 1997 there was little, if any, awareness of Thinking Skills. Initially, he developed his own teaching of these strategies, shared his thinking with departmental colleagues and joined the LEA Thinking Skills in Humanities Network and the University's subject network. At this point his ideas had little impact on the rest of the school but he felt part of something bigger.

Shortly before Doug joined the school, Ofsted had identified a key issue as being the lack of challenge and higher-order thinking skills in most departments, including Humanities. The department began to recognise that Doug's Thinking Skills strategies might provide some of the answers. Doug registered on the LEA/University M.Ed Thinking Skills course whilst the Head of Department attended various INSET days. The use of Thinking Skills strategies was piloted initially in Y9 and later spread throughout the school. The department's GCSE results began to improve steadily and it was recognised as a centre of good practice in the school.

The Headteacher had joined the school just as Ofsted visited. He began to place an ever-greater emphasis on teaching and learning. Doug was invited to share his strategies with all colleagues in the school. Two other young teachers (Modern Languages and Science) were by now involved in M.Ed. research projects and asked if they could share their work on Thinking Skills with the staff – informally. A 'Thinking Lunch' was instigated. Every month, teachers were invited to share a strategy with interested colleagues and the school provided a free buffet lunch! These continue. A 'Think Tank' of interested staff was established and the school was invited to join 5 other High Schools, 3 LEAs and the University of Newcastle in the North East School Based Research Consortium (Thinking Skills). A successful bid for 10 BPRS grants was made and the three staff participated in a TIPD (Teachers' International Professional Development Programme) visit to Philadelphia in 2001 to study Thinking Skills in that part of the USA. A great emphasis is now placed on the learning process in this school – for teachers and Senior Managers just as much as for students. Key Stage 4, GCSE and A Level results are all showing an upward trend and it has just received its second Ofsted Report – 'a much improved school'.

Mel Rockett is Senior Advisor for Humanities and 'Thinking for Learning' at Northumberland LEA.

Funding references

TIPD (Teachers' International Professional Development Programme): *www.britishcouncil.org/education/tipd*
SRB (Single Regeneration Budget): *www.regeneration.dtlr.gov.uk/srb*
NRF (Neighbourhood Renewal Fund): *www.neighbourhood.dtlr.gov.uk/fund*