

Martin Renton describes the kind of support teachers need to risk changing the way they teach

Teachers need encouragement too!



With numerous initiatives and compulsory courses on offer at the moment, I have to admit that when the Head told us that he had booked a 'RAIS Day,' I was not particularly thrilled by the prospect of another set of consultants coming into school to tell us how to become better teachers. But I was to be proved wrong in my concerns, because the continuing effects of the RAIS Day have changed my approach in the classroom and have completely altered my attitude to professional development.

The intervention that I received from N-RAIS (Northumberland's Raising Aspirations in Society Project) was based on self-motivated change; not a compulsory departmental or whole-school initiative. It worked because it was a partnership, based on two-way support and encouragement in a climate of trust. Thus, it proved non-judgemental and non-threatening and has continued to constructively improve my teaching in the classroom.

Deciding to change

Deciding to make changes in the classroom is not easy – particularly if you already like the way you teach – but even if it appears daunting, it is worth discovering new approaches. It feels good simply to branch out, challenge yourself, enjoy your job and not stagnate.

Providing the framework for self-generated change requires a trainer with a good deal of skill, determination and enthusiasm. Effective external motivation means firing a teacher's imagination and enthusing them to develop their own practice, whilst also providing the expert support to facilitate that on a meaningful level. This means ensuring that advice is relevant, purposeful and focussed.

At the end of the RAIS-Day (a day where the N-RAIS team demonstrate some thinking approaches in the classroom), the debrief made it clear that any further professional development required an 'opt-in' from teachers. I found this more motivational than being told to make compulsory changes to suit a whole-school initiative. I approached one of the team with my idea for professional development – creating a classroom ethos that fostered a more open network of discussion.

This first meeting is absolutely vital where teachers are expected to 'opt-in.' Working with someone in your classroom for a number of weeks, having them observe your teaching style and inevitably making mistakes in front

of them, requires someone that you know you can trust. You are in a professionally vulnerable position, so a good one-to-one relationship is vital.

Finding the right person for the role – someone that provides encouragement, support, listening skills and for me, a good sense of humour – makes the partnership successful. If we believe that good teaching takes place in a classroom ethos of support and positivity, then surely the same has to apply in the professional context for teacher improvement to take place. Where there is a genuine desire from the trainer to want the teacher to attempt new strategies in the classroom, there needs to be a constructive two-way flow of ideas and information.



Picture for a moment, JRR Tolkein and CS Lewis drinking coffee in a smoke-filled café of an afternoon. The conversation turns to the fictitious Middle Earth; an ordinary land that looks like any other as they start to talk. But then it grows, developing shires, fortresses, creature inhabitants and of course, the Ring. The story develops into an epic trilogy, and later becomes a box office smash. The ideas and the enthusiasm came from within Tolkein, but his ideas expanded and the motivation to develop them grew through his conversations with Lewis.

Substitute the smoke-filled café for the school, Middle Earth for the classroom, the Ring for a circle of chairs and the box office smash for thirty happy pupils, and you have the motivation cycle that developed with N-RAIS.

By sharing ideas with an external agent, we sometimes help clarify our own ideas, view something from a new perspective, or just get answers that had eluded us before. It was the development of a positive one-to-one

Teachers try out strategies



relationship with constructive ideals and expert support that bred the trust, enthusiasm and thus, the motivation to help me improve my classroom practice.

Planning for change

Knowing our brief, we set about making plans. A couple of meetings after school outlined an alternative approach to a Humanities topic that I was already comfortable teaching. Rather than changing the content of the topic to suit the strategies we intended to implement, we used the learning objectives from an existing scheme of work to design lessons that used talking and thinking strategies. The objective remained the same; the means by which it was achieved, changed completely.

We began by looking at why we get children to 'think' in the first place. This sounds obvious but by actually picking apart some of the strands in the complex nature of classroom practice we can learn a lot about our approach to aspects of education. By understanding where we are now, we can begin to decide on where new ideas could intertwine with existing practice. Remember, we are already good teachers – we are extending and adding to our approach to improve it further.

The first lesson that we planned together focussed on a thinking-skills activity and a debriefing session that tried to tease out the methods of thinking that the pupils had used. Obviously the basis of the lesson would be 'talk' and David (my N-RAIS guide) carefully explained some the methods we could use to achieve this.

The lesson was to begin with an 'odd one out' starter, followed by a card sorting activity using diamond-ranking in order to encourage focused, paired talk. The strategies that the pupils had used to categorise and rank their cards would be the basis of the debrief at the end of the lesson, which would explore the pupils feelings on whether or not these strategies had helped them to achieve the learning objective.

We completed the lesson (with only a few embarrassing moments and minor mishaps!) and met shortly afterwards to discuss where we felt the lesson had value and what we could learn from it for the next in the series of observed lessons we would undertake.

Analysing change

As teachers, we are used to being observed in the classroom during teacher-training to performance management and,

of course, Ofsted inspections. Due to the nature of these observations, the feedback that follows tends to be judgemental, however positively framed the criticism might be. Perhaps because of this, observed lessons tend to be approached with a sense of paranoia and insecurity.

For that reason, David explained that our post-lesson discussion was a debrief, just as with the pupils. A key feature of this is to ask ourselves what we have learnt from the intervention and how we are going to change, improve or extend ideas for the next session. There were no judgemental terms used and David didn't lead the debrief, instead we focused *together* on *our* ideas and *our* planning.

We discussed the thinking strategies and how to coax further talk for purpose from the children. With mutual respect for each other as professionals, it is taken for granted that the teacher can teach: all we were doing was adding new strategies to existing classroom practice. The execution of the lesson is less relevant than the approach, meaning that the post-lesson debrief can be non-judgemental and therefore non-threatening.

When we discussed the 'Odd One Out' starter, we recognised that there were fewer pupil responses than expected. In a judgemental observation, that would have appeared in the 'weaknesses' box (unless there is a new 'well done for attempting something different' box). David and I debated why the children might not have reacted as we expected, and decided that, as we were starting a new approach in the classroom, the pupils would need training time too.

So for the next lesson we planned to get the children to work out an answer with their partner before feeding back to the whole class. The thinking behind this strategy was to get them talking at the start and in the frame of mind to extend more purposeful talk later. That worked well and I now use it to start most lessons.



A RAIS day with Mike Henry

So although observation itself is not a new concept, the discussion after the lesson was a radical change. In the traditional approach, the teacher is made to feel at fault, whereas in the partnership approach, the teacher remains a competent professional. This meaningful two-way exchange then sparks further encouragement.

The N-RAIS intervention I received was neither threatening nor judgemental, but showed that a motivational approach to professional development can inspire teachers to continue to improve. What radical encouragement provides is the framework of support, enthusiasm and expertise to achieve this.

If more teachers were encouraged in this way during programmes for professional development, then I believe that more teachers would opt for challenging their own practice. A school of learning teachers surely has the potential to create the right climate for a school of learning pupils.

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