

Developing evaluation skills in the humanities

Methwold High School: Kathryn Wright

Purpose

- To develop the learners' ability to transfer key processes and skills between different curriculum areas. For example, to build their discussion skills so that they could confidently evaluate views and evidence across the humanities.

Main emphasis

The main part of this project was built around a range of teaching and learning strategies designed to engage learners' interest in aspects of history, geography and RE. Each strategy provided them with opportunities to evaluate a range of different view points. At the end of the sequence of lessons, students evaluated their own learning.

School profile

Total number of learners	714
Age range	11-18
Specialist status	Applying for Sports College
Level 5 and above in key stage 3 tests (2007)	73%
Five A*-C at GCSE (2007)	50%
Special educational needs	SEN Register – 215 (19 statemented)

Methwold High School is a mixed comprehensive school which welcomes students of all abilities aged between 11 and 18 who live both within the school's catchment area and outside. The designated catchment area is extensive and covers more than a dozen surrounding and more distant villages and towns. Central to the school's aim is its determination for all students to achieve the best they are capable of in all aspects of their education and to prepare them for adult life. The school also aims to play an active part in the local community and servicing its needs.

Question 1: What were we trying to achieve?

The starting point: Identifying the priorities for development

What were our learners like at the start?

The humanities faculty had identified through their normal monitoring processes and department meetings, that many students were unable to transfer skills or processes between different subject areas. The key area for development was the skill of evaluation and encouraging students to listen to and appreciate different points of view. In my role as an RSA, I worked with the faculty to look at ways of enabling this to begin.

What differences did we want to see in our learners?

The main areas of development were key processes and students' attitudes towards learning. We wanted students:

- to develop their evaluation skills, including evaluation of arguments, evidence, opinion and their own learning;
- to be able to use the terms 'agree' and 'disagree' correctly in discussion;
- to examine and take account of a variety of views when considering questions and issues raised in humanities.

In relation to the Norfolk agreed syllabus, evaluation is a key process identified within 'experiences and opportunities'. In addition, this process is a common thread running through history, geography and citizenship in the new curriculum. The development of this process is essential when enabling students to flourish as independent enquirers, creative thinkers and reflective learners. One of the most important aspects to be considered was enabling students to evaluate their experiences and use this to inform future learning and progress.

Question 2: How did we organise learning to achieve our aims?

How did we set about making a change?

The humanities team met for half a day to discuss the key processes they felt were strengths within the faculty, and ones which were areas of weakness. There was agreement among colleagues that learners were generally able to articulate their own views clearly, but that some were unable or unwilling to listen to the views of others or consider different points of view in oral and written work.

It was agreed to focus on the skill of evaluation, which would include elements of reasoning and analysis within it. It was decided to focus on two classes, one in Year 8 and one in Year 9 (termed 'focus groups' in this case study). Although in practice where a teacher was working with more than one class in a year group, they decided to use the strategies with all their classes. There was discussion about the kind of strategies that might be used across the faculty in order to develop these skills with learners. I shared a selection of strategies from Leading in Learning Key Stage 3 strategy materials, and also work that I had done previously in RE. Three strategies were identified, which would be used by all the humanities faculty over a six week period. It was decided to review the work after three to four weeks to monitor and evaluate progress so far.

The strategies chosen were:

- **Strategy 1: Metacognitive plenary** – focusing on how students learned and evaluating their own learning. This work is based on the Leading in Learning Key Stage 3 materials.
- **Strategy 2: Community of enquiry** – focusing on the use of 'agree' and 'disagree' in discussion. This is based on the philosophy for children approach.
- **Strategy 3: Make a stand** – focusing on evaluation of arguments and acceptance that there are at least two sides to any controversial issue. This is a simple activity using a quotation on the board and asking students to write arguments on post it notes which they stick on the board under 'agree', 'disagree' or in the middle if they think their view fits with neither agree or disagree.

Each of these strategies would be used at least once a week by one or more of the departments within the faculty. A chart was created summarising how the strategies would be used in the different schemes of work.

How this worked in practice – a three to four week review:

Metacognitive Plenary: The Year 8 focus group took part in a metacognitive plenary in one geography lesson. This was highly successful, with students being able to articulate clearly to the teacher which skills they had used in the lesson.

The Year 9 focus group took part in two metacognitive plenaries, in conjunction with communities of enquiry. Students were able to articulate when they had chosen a question which did not encourage discussion or was not open-ended enough. They also articulated the fact that a small number of people dominated the discussion and talked about ways that this might be improved in the future.

Community of Enquiry: The students in the focus Year 8 group took part in three communities of enquiry. The stimulus used for these were:

- a cartoon of the civil war (History);
- an image of the world from space (RE);
- an image of a wave (Geography).

The students found this strategy hard in the first two instances. They did well for the first 20-30 minutes in each of the first two sessions and chose good questions to discuss.

In history they did not raise many questions, although the quality of the question chosen for discussion was good - 'Why did parliament always win?'

In RE, students came up with questions such as 'How did it get there?' 'Why is it made up of a lot of water?' 'Why is it covered in cloud?' The students voted for a sensible question, although they were unable to discuss effectively and wrote a response to the question instead. This in itself was a step forward as students did articulate their views clearly even though they were written down and not verbalised.

However, by the third session (geography) students had grasped the strategy and articulated to the teacher that they knew what to do and what was expected of them. In this latter session, students were asked to raise questions about an image of a wave. They articulated geography based questions such as, 'What makes it so big?' 'How was it happening?' 'What processes were going on?' The students came up with different theories which they would not have been able to consider if the subject had been approached in the usual way. They created hypotheses about the impact of the wind or boulders on the waves and evaluated between them, drawing conclusions.

Whilst the focus was on one particular class, the enthusiasm of the teachers for this project meant that many other Year 8 classes benefited from the use of the different focus strategies.

With another Year 8 group an RE teacher adapted the community of enquiry strategy. She showed students four questions in the textbook based on what they had done and asked

them to choose which question they thought would be best to discuss in a community of enquiry. They chose the question 'Has modern progress been a good thing?'

Having already used the strategy in RE with an image of the world as a stimulus, they spent much longer evaluating which question would be the best one to discuss and also chose the most appropriate question from the list for a philosophical approach. The students used the terms 'agree' and 'disagree' effectively, and were able to give reasons relating to the different sides of the argument. Many had not previously been able to do this and were gaining confidence in justifying their views.

The Year 9 focus group took part in two communities of enquiry. The stimuli for these were:

- a PowerPoint presentation showing images of Jerusalem in the 21st century (RE);
- a collection of images showing a football, a pair of trainers, a child slave and a variety of strap lines (Geography).

The students were able to reflect well on both stimuli. They generated a large number of questions, but tended to choose questions which they felt amusing, rather than those which would stimulate the most discussion. However, some students in the group articulated this early in the discussion and managed to encourage others to focus on the heart of the issue for some of the time.

Make a stand: The Year 8 Focus group took part in two 'Make a stand' activities. The two quotations used as a basis for this were:

- 'The world was made for humans to use as they wish' (RE); and
- 'Rich powerful people should rule the country, using parliament to do so (history).

Both of these lessons went well. In the history lesson, students in groups took on the role of one post civil war group in 1649. e.g. Quakers, Diggers, Fifth Monarchists, Levellers, Muggletonians, Ranters. Students analysed the statement saying which (if any) part they agreed with as the character. A small number of students were able to give reasons for agreeing and disagreeing. Some students said that listening to other people had contributed to changing their view. In the RE lesson, students referred to the teachings of different religions, including Christianity and Hinduism, and also to non-religious groups.

The Year 9 focus group took part in two 'Make a stand' lessons where students used a range of arguments.

In addition, another Year 8 group took part in a 'Make a stand' for history which focussed on whether Charles or Parliament were to blame for the civil war. This was a lower ability group than the focus group. Many students changed their minds as a result of this activity and many showed more confidence in voicing their opinions. In addition, it encouraged the quieter students to contribute. The teacher developed this into a piece of structured evaluative writing based on one of the other strategies shared in the initial humanities meeting. The teacher felt that if the 'make a stand' strategy had not been used, then students would only have given their own view and would not have thought about different possibilities.

Other developments

One teacher became interested in the use of community of enquiry across the key stage to develop evaluation, as well as speaking and listening skills and developed different ways of including it in Year 7. She used a picture of Tollund Man as a stimulus. With a Year 7 low ability group the key question 'Did they have razors back then?' was chosen by the group. This led to discussion of a wide range of issues including when the man was around and what people used as razors. The students were all engaged in the learning. The teacher followed up the lesson with other images of the Tollund Man. Another higher ability group chose the question 'Was he made of chocolate?' This led to many other questions and philosophical issues relating to whether the man was really human or not.

Key Changes and developments

By focusing on key processes, rather than content, the level of students' thinking was developed as they had to create their own ideas and suggestions in response to different stimuli and quotations. As the whole humanities faculty took this approach, students began to realise that the subjects were not independent of each other. One teacher commented that the students felt that the strategies used must be important because they weren't 'just doing them in RE!' In some cases the defined subject areas became blurred as students created philosophical arguments in history and geography, as well as in RE. Assessment became focused more on students' learning, rather than on the content that had to be remembered. For example in one instance a 'Make a stand' activity was used at the beginning of the unit, and the teacher planned to reuse it again at the end of the unit for students to evaluate their own learning and write a response based on whether they had changed their mind about the quotation since the first lesson.

Question 3: How well have we achieved our aims?

What differences are evident? What impact have we made on our learners?

Based on classroom observations and interviews with teachers, the key differences evident are that students are more open to a range of different ideas, beliefs and hypotheses. Students were enabled to explore issues from different perspectives using clear criteria for discussion (particularly 'agree' and 'disagree'). They were able to evaluate their own learning, and realise that sometimes other people's ideas can help us reflect on our own. Students justified arguments better and some students began to challenge the views of others. This is an area for further development, particularly helping the more able and articulate students to press others for further reasons and evidence.

Students were able to question each other and extend their own thinking. They began to connect their ideas with those of others, and see the similarities and differences between them. In conversation with teachers, it was evident that they wanted to persevere, particularly with the community of enquiry approach and to look at ways of incorporating this in schemes of work in the future. They were aware that changes in students' understanding of 'how they learn' would take time, and that this trial period was only the start of the development.

The metacognitive plenaries remain an area for future development and the faculty team plan to introduce this more in future planning.

In addition, the humanities team worked together to explore how best they might approach this project. This has encouraged all of them to take part, and has been a very positive experience for the team. They now plan to look at another key process and accompanying

strategies that might be used across the faculty. In addition, they are thinking of developing a cross-curricular project based on the concept of migration.

Kathryn Wright (RSA), with thanks to the Humanities team at Methwold High School, Norfolk.