

BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH SCHOLARSHIP

Report Level 1

Thinking Skills and English – Mary Martin

What were your original aims?

- To continue to develop Thinking Skills strategies as a means towards enabling pupils at Key Stage 3/4 to write critically and analytically.
- To develop Thinking Skills strategies in Key Stage 3/4 to encourage pupils' capacity to comment on texts.
- To investigate how understandings about literary and writing genres suggest conceptual frameworks for discussion and sequencing routes in thinking.
- To investigate and track the impact that use of Thinking Skills strategies has on drafting analytical prose which houses exploration of ideas and the expression of opinion.
- To investigate the impact that the use of Thinking Skills and ICT has on poetry analysis.

How did you refine those aims?

Because some of my aims involved building on previous work, I was able to re-visit some earlier tested Thinking Skills strategies for re-trial and develop some new ones alongside them. I was therefore able to test fairly thoroughly the impact of the strategies on drafting analytical prose.

My initial intention was to explore both analytical writing about different literary genres and also to investigate using Thinking Skills strategies to promote writing for different purposes within different writing genres but this second aim proved too ambitious within the time frame.

I was able to continue to investigate the impact of using Thinking Skills and ICT on some Key Stage 4 poetry analysis.

What research processes did you find helpful?

Because I wanted to see if I could systematise the interventions and basic work model I have evolved into progressive strand within English Years 7 – 13.

I spent some time reading literary and linguistic theory (Vygotsky, Bruner, Betelheim, Britton and Pinker). All of these have informed my thinking about conceptual frameworks and discourses in English over many years. I was, however, looking for some overarching schema to connect together the separate units of work incorporating Thinking Skills strategies to lend some coherence to my methodology over time. To my delight, a recent publication by Christopher Booker "The Seven Basic Plots – Why we tell stories" (Continuum

2004) seems to offer exactly what I have been looking for. Booker's thesis is essentially that all the stories ever written can be categorised into seven types of 'plot' namely: "Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, Rebirth".

His survey and classification of world literature from the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh to "The Lord of the Rings" is entirely convincing and has allowed me to organise my existing work modules into a progressive path of narrative 'plots' albeit involving a variety of literary genres namely prose, drama and poetry.

I found the observations of small group discussion and the pupil interviews helpful and the examination of writing samples allowed me to track progress. Lesson observations enabled me to continually refine the stages, instructions and roles for discussion and to improve idea-logging.

Texts for which I have created 'Thinking Skills' strategies and whose structure conforms to this series of plots are: 'Beowulf', 'Holes', 'The Big Sleep', 'The Ancient Mariner', 'Pride and Prejudice', 'Macbeth' and 'A Christmas Carol'.

What research process did your pupils find helpful?

Pupils found interviews helpful in encouraging their awareness-raising of the thinking processes involved in sorting, grouping and sequencing ideas about texts. It was interesting to note time and time again how asking questions about thinking forced pupils to engage in metacognition and gradually raise their levels of perception about analytical thought processes.

What were the learning points you gained from undertaking the research and what were your findings?

Observing group discussion enabled me to see the need for assigning and defining roles in group discussion to encourage focus and on-taskness. I found it necessary to stress the importance of collaborative discussion as a driver for statement sorting and developing. I have seen how significant it is to guide and monitor progressive talk.

In some sessions, I found it helpful to recommend that pupils recorded key points from their discussions on different coloured sheets to aid the gathering of ideas towards paragraph composition; this involved deviating from original sorting task towards identification of idea domains arising from given statement groups; in some sessions, I found it useful to ask pupils to use given statements as initial idea guides and then to create some of their own to add to the store prior to the identification of key points towards paragraph composition.

I was pleased to find that open-endedness within a learnt structured process yielded very thoughtful development of ideas from pupils at all ability levels.

In general I found that close observation of pupils enabled me to see how to establish and stage discussion in a way that could predictably guarantee productive, engaging developmental talk. Through refining recommendations for recording and ordering ideas, I found it possible to engineer very thorough and detailed planning.

Through promoting talk and writing using Thinking Skills strategies, I have found that they facilitate a marked improvement in pupils' writing; accuracy, coherence and fluency are all

much improved. In addition pupils' self-esteem and confidence are bolstered by the talk strategies.

I have found that the use of ICT to develop poetry annotation and analysis enables pupils to begin to develop a capacity for furthering their own independent study of poetry and undoubtedly improves the quality of written analytical response.

What evidence relates to this learning and your findings?

Data from observation

- Pupils' increased confidence in discussion technique including: listening, feedback, summary, challenge.
- Pupils' improved capacity for identifying, sorting, grouping and sequencing of ideas.
- Pupils' improved skill in identifying patterns in poetry and seeing ties across texts.
- Pupils' improved appreciation of the impact of poetic technique upon meaning.

Data from interviews and written portfolio samples:

- Pupils' gaining in understanding their own thought processes.
- Pupils' increased appreciation of value of listening to peers.
- Pupils' improved understanding of how writing is shaped through ideas development, elaboration and sequencing.
- Pupils' improved planning and drafting skills and general increased fluency.
- Pupils' increased perception of layering of meaning in poetry.

What are the questions for your future practice?

I think I now have a degree of clarity about how to establish a writing course to develop analytical writing to critique narrative 'plots' in varying literary genres. This is, however, not the whole story! I would like to consider in depth my whole methodology applied to the analysis of non-fiction material or alternatively develop a progressive Thinking Skills course which promotes transactional writing using different forms.

Now that I have discovered this 'plot' theory, I propose to continue to find other examples of texts which fit into Booker's paradigm in order to vary the progressive sequence in the teaching of analysis of narrative and therefore allow for variety of treatment and choice in the teaching sequence across Years 7 – 13.

What are the questions for your school?

I think it is up to me to make some of my strategies more attractive to other teachers by adapting them to new texts and to promote interest in the '7 Basic Plots' theory by way of

encouraging interest in the possibility of progression between work modules being linked to a bigger theory encapsulating the origins and variety of narrative.

Are there any questions for further research?

I am interested in continuing to examine the nature of guided classroom talk and the linkage between that and structured written outcomes.

I am interested in exploring further some gender differences I have noted regarding engagement with speaking roles, I want to investigate further the development of boys' talk in the affective domain. I would like to continue to develop approaches to poetry analysis using ICT by trialling selections of texts and authors in particular sequences and see if anything like the '7 Basic Plots' theory emerges to help make a progressive course more obviously coherent.

How did you disseminate your findings with others, e.g. within your school, other schools, the LEA, wider?

I have shared my work within my own department, at school inset sessions and as an AST have worked with ITE in our own Training School and at the Faculty of Education, Cambridge University. I have presented my methodology and findings at local Research conferences and through our NLC.