



Bellamont Forest, Co Cavan, Ireland

One of Ireland's finest Palladian villas, designed by famous architect Sir Edward Lovett Pierce in 1725. In some of the rooms in the house there are full size false doors set in the walls. These doors do not open, they provide symmetry, matching the real door on the other side of the room.

Some people just think differently!

MAKING THINKING VISIBLE

STUDENT TO STUDENT LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

Richard Coote

We have developed our Thinking-Based Learning approach to teach our students to think more skilfully. With our 'real world' scenarios and their fertile questions we are in a good position to achieve this goal of deeper and more skilful thinking.

Up until now their thinking has only become clearly visible at the end of a Quest (unit of work) when we can see their thinking in the arguments they write and the contributions they make to our 'concluding conversations.'

In an email discussion we had with Dr John Hattie he made the following comment;

'I also am a great fan of short seminars where the students ask each other questions (NO teacher involvement) as this often reflects the level of understanding -- there is a method called Paideia which I have evaluated and find very good in this manner.'

We contacted John and asked for more details. He replied that the University of Auckland had research underway in a number of schools on the effectiveness of Paideia Seminars and suggested we might like to be involved. The Paideia Seminar is defined as "a collaborative, intellectual dialogue about ideas and values, based on a text, facilitated by open-

ended questions, resulting in enhanced conceptual understanding (Roberts and Billings, 2008). It is aligned fully with Facilitating Shared Learning, (Effective Pedagogy as recommended in the New Zealand Curriculum, pg 34).

The research project involved two of our teachers and their classes involved in Paideia Seminars both in the classroom and on Moodle. The research showed deep high quality discussions taking place both in the classroom and on Moodle.

'The results of the project show that when students are interacting with other students the complexity of their dialogue is deeper than in a normal classroom discussion. Of paramount importance to the complexity of the dialogue being deeper are: a highly provocative statement for the students to be considering and analysing, commitment from the teacher to provide domain knowledge on the topic which is available and at the correct level for students, explicit teaching of socratic questioning, quality preparation by students and high teacher expectations.' Maree Davies, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education, University of Auckland.

We adapted this approach in two ways. We included our 'Fertile Question' as a base for the 'highly provocative statement' and changed the terminology from Paideia Seminars to Learning Conversations to link with our Concluding Conversations.

In a Learning Conversation student seating is arranged in a circle. While this may seem a minor point, it is crucial in developing a sense of collaboration and involvement, and in facilitating eye contact between students, thus encouraging dialogue and interaction. It puts students on an equal footing, reducing opportunities to 'hide at the back' or 'dominate from the front'.

The conversation is sparked by a text or question chosen by the teacher that is rich in ideas and values, complex and challenging, ambiguous, and relevant to an area of learning. A text can vary in type from an article, poem, painting or short story however it is the common ground for the dialogue. Alternatively, the teacher could pose a connected, extending, and challenging question that will spark a discussion of current thinking and understanding in relation to a learning topic. Mostly we use the fertile question posed in our Quest scenario.



THE SKILFUL THINKER

Teachers of Thinking - Aotearoa Collaborative

Essentially then, a Learning Conversation is a collaborative dialogue between students facilitated by open ended questions.

Students:

- do not raise their hands to speak.
- direct their comments and questions to each other, not the teacher.
- support their statements with reference to the chosen text.
- use each other's names when agreeing or disagreeing with each other.
- show respect for each others' views and options by listening and not criticising.

While a teacher may initiate the discussion, student participants take more 'talk turns' than the teacher and teacher involvement is limited to re-focusing the conversation if students stray off the topic, asking follow-up questions if necessary, managing behaviour and tracking the conversation and participation.

We then developed a number of professional development strategies to see this approach taken school-wide and embedded in our practice. The teachers involved in the University of Auckland research created a Teachers Guide and we filmed both teachers and students giving their thoughts on the approach as well as a learning conversation taking place in one of our classrooms. During the filming we included footage on Concluding Conversations. Concluding Conversations had been developed here three years before when we were challenged by our Critical Friend, Dr Adam Lefstein, Senior Lecturer in Education at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel to include a high stakes concluding performance that would share and celebrate our students new insights and understandings and among other things to critique the integrity of their knowledge.

These professional development resources supported and guided our teachers in putting the research to the test of practice. A Lead Teacher also made her class available so teachers could observe a class during a learning conversation.

As the research also emphasised the effectiveness of Moodle as a place for high quality learning conversations we also set up classroom Moodle pages and began Learning Conversations as a regular part of student learning.

The Learning Conversation are going very well. Many students are viewing the conversations and a good number contributing. It is common

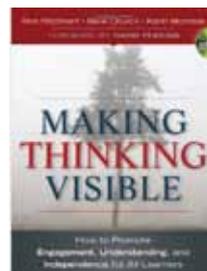
for class pages to have 100+ views with one class having 1,297 and to have around 30 students posting, some multiple times. The quality of the posts is high with students making a real effort to contribute good ideas and make their thinking visible.

The goal of this project is to see high quality, school wide, student to student Learning Conversations embedded in our practice.

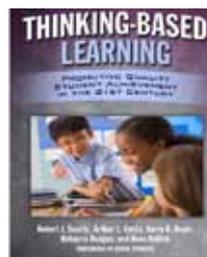
Our thanks to teachers Emma Davies, Stephen Johnston and Tamsin Neubert for leading the way with this project.

If you would like a copy of the Learning Conversations Teachers Guide and the DVD please email Richard rcoote@bis.school.nz

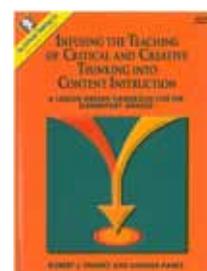
BOOKS WORTH READING



Making Thinking Visible by Ron Ritchhart, Mark Church and Karin Morrison, forward by David Perkins.



Thinking-Based Learning by Robert Swartz, Art Costa, Barry Beyer, Rebecca Reagan, and Bena Kallick, forward by David Perkins.



Infusing the Teaching of Critical and Creative Thinking into Content Instruction: A Lesson Design Handbook for the Elementary Grades by Robert J. Swartz and Sandra Parks.