

When enthusiasms become compulsory

Regular listeners to *The Archers* will know that bad boy Edward Grundy, as part of his community service for attempted burglary, must complete a course in thinking skills. Even soaps, it seems, are recognising the growing interest in thinking skills and the existence of many real projects up and down the country.

Unfortunately, as one of our news stories points out, recent research from the Home Office has thrown doubt on the effectiveness of a thinking-skills course adopted by the Prison Service to stop inmates from reoffending. This is just the sort of course that young Edward would be taking.

The prison course taught techniques of problem solving and self-control; it encouraged moral thinking and used role-playing to explore non-violent solutions to arguments.

Research suggested that prisoners who attended the course, which has cost the Prison Service £200 million, were just as likely to reoffend as inmates who did not. An earlier study had found that course members were significantly *less* likely to offend – so what went wrong?

A crucial factor seems to be that, in the earlier courses, the attendees were volunteers and the staff were highly motivated and thoroughly committed to the course philosophy. After a successful pilot study the course was rapidly expanded and became compulsory for some prisoners. There is food for thought here.

First of all, it is very hard to change people's motivations and attitudes when they are deeply rooted. The teaching of thinking offers tools for change if the motivation is there. The tools may even help students gain some self-esteem by helping them to succeed in tasks that require concentrated thinking about alternatives. But they won't change attitudes unless the whole learning environment is powerfully positive and the students are open to change.

Secondly, a positive innovation may succeed precisely because it generates enthusiasm and hope in people who want to do better. Educational research has turned up some surprising successes for all kinds of interventions. If an intervention is enthusiastically led and the relationships between teachers and students are good, then the motivation and commitment levels of students are likely to increase. This will have positive effects in many unexpected ways. Is the content of the intervention less important than the enthusiasm and encouragement with which it is carried out?

If this were true, it would seem to open the door for evangelist-led education, where the most outrageously boastful or enthusiastic teachers and trainers really would always achieve the best results, no matter what the quality of their educational product or programme.

I must admit that the field of thinking skills feels like that sometimes. There are plenty of people out there who want us to believe that we can transform education for the better if only we all adopt their favourite graphic organisers or their simple problem-solving processes. The teaching of good thinking is much more complicated than that because it can call on many possible methods and depends on attitudes and motivations more than we may care to recognise. What impresses one set of teachers or students may turn others off. Role-plays, for example, can be transforming or laughable, depending on the setting, the expectations of those talking part and the skills of the teacher.

In the long run we are always brought back to reality in what we do by the good sense of teachers and the responses of students. Enthusiasm alone is not enough to compensate for lack of intellectual depth but without enthusiasm teaching thinking is a dead duck. What seems certain is that thinking cannot be taught or learned by order or by inflexible methods.

Editor's questions

Readers will notice that many articles in this issue have a series of 'editor's questions' after them. I added these to stimulate thinking and discussion. *Teaching Thinking* has an online discussion forum. If you would like to respond to any of the articles or questions then use the following address: www.education-quest.com/ubb/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi

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