

## Finding Thinkers' Voices

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*Paul speaks politely, yet dismissively: "I like computer games. We had a barbecue at Scouts. School is just normal. Now I think it should be Winston's turn." He makes a game-show host's gesture of passing to Winston, then sits back in his chair with his arms folded. I ask him if he can tell us a bit more about the games and he mentions the names of some of his favourites. I sense he does not want to elaborate further, so I thank him for his contributions and move on.*

How can I help Paul to be more willing to contribute so that his moment in the spotlight is not so excruciatingly painful? What can I do to draw out his thinking and to make it both visible and audible?

There are six students in my Year 7 special needs literacy class. During our first class together, they each happily tell me the date of their birthday and announce that they will turn thirteen this year. The four boys and two girls have access to a lot of my attention and an opportunity to have significant one-on-one time on a regular basis. Although we have five timetabled classes together each fortnight, the frequency of my contact with them will be subject to the usual interruptions such as a public holiday, a professional learning day off-site, swimming sports and the Year 7 camp occurring in the final week of first term. Interruptions like these are naturally part of the context of a normal school term. A lot happens in their young lives from one class to the next and these are all important events which have their part to play in the students' experiences. It is a challenge in the first few weeks to develop a steady momentum in terms of how the group operates.

It is essential that I establish a good rapport with each student from the outset and get to know each as an individual. This is foundational for their progress as it helps to establish and strengthen their connections with their learning. These students can be all too easily left behind in mainstream classes, so the opportunity that membership of a small group presents - for each of them to have a voice and to use it- is important for their confidence.

Being one of six also means that there is nowhere to hide, so it is crucial that I help each child develop a sound relationship with the others. This enables them to take risks in their learning, to share their thinking, and to be comfortable with learning from mistakes. The optimal environment is one in which they know they are secure, their connections with peers are healthy and they are positively regarded. Membership of the class makes it possible

for each child to develop a close connection with five peers, some of whom belong to different home groups. The quality of relationships and interactions within the group becomes the first cultural force that I attend to as the year commences. My objective is to ensure that the group's dynamics are conducive to the development of students' thinking. To accomplish this, I need to ensure that students are comfortable sharing and learning together, and confident that they will be both listened to and heard when they speak. One of the ways I am learning more about achieving this is via the use of structured conversations as one of the routines within my class.

Conversation can easily become a vehicle for students to avoid engaging with anything connected to the purpose of a lesson so I need to present the task and the structure in a manner that establishes the learning intentions for the initial session quite clearly. In simple terms, these are thinking carefully about specific questions, contributing to a conversation, and listening closely enough to others' responses to be able to write about them later. With the group seated in our usual rectangular arrangement, I explain that we are going to follow a structure that will start with silent thinking time. I have estimated that 3 minutes will be enough for the main questions. These instructions are on display:

Choose:

- One thing you love to talk about
- Something about your weekend
- Something about school so far that you have liked or are looking forward to

I read the prompts and explain that they will need to share their thinking about each one with the group when it is their turn. I show the students the large digital timer which I have set to 3 minutes and encourage them to consider carefully what they would like to contribute. One of the things I am most interested to observe is how they respond to the idea of thinking time. Will Karl, my compulsive talker, manage to be silent during this time? Will they distract each other in some way? Will they be preoccupied by the timer? Is 3 minutes going to be enough, or too much time? Will Paul have anything to say at all?

With the timer running, I move aside so they can view the prompts without me blocking their vision. They settle quickly and I am interested to see some glances into space which seem to suggest that thinking is taking place. Paul stretches back in his chair quietly and undemonstratively. Angela looks at the desk and occasionally glances at the prompts.

I tell the class that there is half a minute left and once the timer expires, make my way back to join the group. It is time for them now to share their thoughts in turn, and to practise listening attentively to others' contributions. With pen at the ready, I jot down their comments.

Paul speaks politely, yet dismissively: "I like computer games. We had a barbecue at Scouts. School is just normal. Now I think it should be Winston's turn." He makes a game-show host's gesture of passing to Winston, then sits back in his chair with his arms folded. I ask him if he can tell us a bit more about the games and he mentions the names of some of his favourites. I sense he does not want to elaborate further, so I thank him for his contributions and move on.

Tiffany loves to talk about animals and shares the highlight of her weekend - the arrival of her new hermit crab Chloe. Her narrative continues with some animated expression as she describes Chloe's disappearance and near-death experience. Some students have questions so I decide to let Tiffany finish her contributions first and then ask clarifying questions. The account concludes and Tiffany explains in closing that school is good this year and she likes her teachers.

Karl's eyes light up as I indicate that it is his turn to speak. Whilst it is not hard to draw him out, it can be challenging keeping Karl on topic and I know from past experience that it is sometimes necessary to limit the scope of his contributions. He is a friendly and effervescent boy with a cheerful and engaging disposition, yet he struggles, at times, to sense that he is close to overstepping the boundaries of others' tolerance.

Matt and Winston both talk about games, too, and it is clear that they have some genuine expertise in the IT area even at a very young age. Winston talks about a list of things he wanted to finish over the weekend, including cleaning up his server. I express genuine admiration for his ability and watch his delight as I naively ask him to describe what a server looks like and what it does. Then I ask him about the game he enjoys most and after a thoughtful pause he says, "Minecraft....it's like real life, only pixilated." This phrase goes straight into my notebook for future reference.

Paul seems desperate to contribute and asks if he can draw it on the board to explain how it works. I give him a whiteboard marker and encourage him to show the group what he knows about it. He draws a box and a shape inside it, describing the space as the place where gamers make things. Frustrated by his inability to articulate further, he encourages others to help.

Karl cannot contain himself any longer and adds, "It is like lego in a sandbox...on steroids!" Tiffany and Angela want to ask some clarifying questions, and Winston is happy to answer them.

Once all students have contributed, I thank them for sharing their thinking, their questions and for listening to each other. We conclude with structured writing which requires students to recall some of the information they have gathered through listening closely to their peers. I pose the following stems and instruct the class to use it as a basis for their account of today's conversation:

This morning we began our class with conversation. We had to talk about...(here you can write about the prompts you were given). I was interested when....(recall at least 2 times in the conversation when you wanted to hear more and write about them). I spoke about...(mention the most important thing that you shared with the group).

When completing the written component, several students ask their peers to repeat some details as they attempt to represent faithfully the information shared by others. Their writing takes time and is represented here in its original state:

We talked about what we did on the weekend, school, and one thing we love to talk about. I was instred when Winston and Paul where cleaning up a minecraft suver. I spoke about halo night and what I did on the weekend. (Matt)

we talked about our weekend and how school is going for us. I was interested when Winston talked about MINECRAFT and how Paul explayined it to tiffany and Angela. I spoke about shantels birthday at Red Emper and how my Aunty came back from CHINA and bought me a gold and silver cross. (Karl)

We talked about our weekend. I was intersted when Karl said he went to red empورا and had yumca. I spoke about playing portal 2. (Winston)

We talk about one thing I love to talk about something about your weekend. What are you looking forward. I was inerested when Tiffany talk about hermit crap and she put it on her bed and she went away and she came back it was under her pillow. I spoke about Saturday night I went to my uncle house and I done my room. (Angela)

We talked about one thing I love to talk about, something about my weekend and what I have liked about school. I was interested when Karl said that he got a cross from his Auntie. I spoke about that yesterday I got a hermit crab and I named it chloe. (Tiffany)

It is evident that the students have followed the structure of both the conversation and the writing prompts quite closely, and that they have been engaged in listening well to their peers. The cultural force of relationships and interactions<sup>i</sup> is beginning to be strengthened positively and I can start to shape future conversations more explicitly around thinking. Paul's response reflects his preoccupation with the world that I sense may be his safe haven:

On saturday me and all my friends decided to play minecraft on the server my friend has. we all got assined jobs to do all my jobs were

- fix the spleef arena
- fix up all roads
- fill huge holes
- clear space underground for huge charge (Paul)

His reconnecting with Saturday's challenges and not with the group's conversation or the writing prompts is a clear sign of where his attention is focused. I choose not to refocus his attention at this stage on following the prompts. It is more valuable to me at this early stage that he is attempting to write and that he learns that I will not threaten his comfort zone too much too soon.

At the conclusion of the first structured conversation, I reflect on the challenges I will face in keeping track of the exchanges and capturing the subtleties of expression which convey so much information non-verbally. So much is conveyed by posture, gesture, the raising of an eyebrow or the rolling of the eyes, for example. Even with my pen at the ready, I miss so much as the flow of conversation and its exchanges can be quite fast-paced. It is important that I don't upset the flow by trying to note everything down. Capturing a digital recording seems to be the most manageable and least disruptive option for future classes. I can then notice more about the non-verbal aspects of the exchanges. This will be something to discuss with the class and for which the students will need some preparation.

A further dilemma is finding the right balance on the continuum between too often and not frequently enough for the structured conversations. The conversations need to occur on a sufficiently regular basis for them to be a useful tool toward achieving the objectives I have set, yet I need enough

variation to ensure that the occasions are fresh and engaging for the students. There is something to be said for using the context of school and their shared experiences throughout the week as the basis for at least some of the conversations I will construct. Building conversations into the program on two successive Mondays, I conclude after a second session that a greater element of changeability in the frequency of the approach is important.

At some point, I will need to exercise sound judgement about constructing conversations that reach beyond games or topics of high personal interest to the students. Three weeks into the first term may not be the best time to challenge students in this regard. How will I know that they are all ready to venture into this space, and then how can I best equip them to find their voices and share more of their thinking? As I weigh up these considerations, I know that this is really about moving Paul from safe territory to a space that is beyond his comfort zone, and doing so in a way that does not stretch him too far too quickly. With six students in the class, there is nowhere for him to hide if he cannot participate confidently in whole group conversations.

There is great excitement in the class about the new iPads and I am keen to take advantage of the students' enthusiasm. Having the group develop strategies together to solve word puzzles in the applications becomes a productive exercise on several levels. Initially, 3 minutes' thinking time is devoted to individually listing strategies to solve a puzzle in Hangman. These are shared with partners then contributed to the class list. Using the Hangman app to set a puzzle for a peer and, in turn, to solve a puzzle posed by a peer offers opportunities to build relationships and to test each other using the class' spelling list. This approach becomes more effective with a long list or with several sets of words otherwise the students abandon the strategies and simply search their list for words containing a set number of letters. Our whole group discussion becomes reflective as we evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies which have been developed and tested together.

By second term, as we move into studying the novel *Parvana*<sup>ii</sup> by Deborah Ellis, Paul has made good progress in his interactions with the group. He maintains eye contact for some conversations, answers questions quite readily and volunteers to read aloud. He also helps with moving furniture to facilitate the group sitting together without being evasive, and seems keen to help set up for our sessions to start smoothly. This is often a precursor to him asking, "Are we using the iPads today?" When he is not the first to arrive, others ask the same question, clearly excited about discovering apps and testing their skills and strategies. In the ensuing weeks we have progressed to

using Word Jigsaw, SpellBoard and Chicktionary along with memorization apps and a dictionary.

Close study of *Parvana* provides many opportunities for conversation as we read aloud together, discover new language, and clarify understandings. The students are studying the text in their mainstream English classes so I aim to deepen their understanding through a closer reading of selected chapters and passages. There are opportunities also for structured conversations, particularly as an extension of the use of various thinking routines<sup>iii</sup>. My intention is for students to engage individually with some thinking routines in the first instance as a means of exploring, clarifying and representing their thinking. Having used the routines in mainstream English classes at senior level, I am eager to try them and to adapt them as may be necessary for younger students. Fundamentally, I believe that all of my students are thinkers whose capacities ought to be strengthened, even though they each experience difficulties with aspects of literacy. As the routines enable students to make their thinking visible, structured conversations about the routines and the thinking they elicit in turn heighten the focus on thinking within their interactions. My goals are that the students will find their voices as thinkers, become confident in articulating their thinking, and learn to listen carefully and respectfully to their peers. It is my expectation that the students will discuss and share their thinking and wonderings, and that they develop an understanding that this is part of their regular experience of the class.

For some parts of the text, I have used the *Headlines*<sup>iv</sup> routine as a way of drawing together the students' thinking. On these occasions, my instruction prior to reading has been to think about some words or short phrases that best represent the main ideas. I encourage students to consider different options which may relate to events, characters, or descriptions. After the reading, the timer is set to sound after 4 minutes, and students are encouraged to develop three possible headlines. Early finishers can add more if they stretch their thinking further. The final part of this exercise is for students to highlight their best headline, which is then shared verbally following this structure:

- Share your headline with the group
- Explain what made you think of it

This routine has revealed some insightful takes on the essence of passages we have shared. It has been important to listen carefully to the explanations. Sharing the headlines has provided opportunities for discussion and some clarifying questions to be asked, particularly about the differences between

minor or incidental matters and major events. Most of the headlines have reflected moments or events:

Leaving in the middle of the night (Matt)

The last glance of Jasper (Angela)

At times students have independently drawn conclusions about themes or messages through this exercise:

Everybodys story is different (Paul)

Follow your dream (Karl)

On other occasions, the discussion has provided an invaluable opportunity to correct a misconception or to debate a matter of interpretation.

I have chosen the thinking routine *Colour-Symbol-Image*<sup>v</sup> on several occasions to help students explore dimensions of the key themes in the text. When leading up to this routine, I have instructed students prior to reading a specific part of the text together to identify its “big ideas” or themes. Our subsequent brainstorming discussions have identified several options for students to explore. Sometimes I have asked students to choose an idea they are interested in exploring further, or to select the idea that they believe to be the most important in the story. On other occasions, I have been prescriptive about the focus, having directed them to pay particular attention to it or to notice when reading how it develops in the chapter.

The *Colour-Symbol-Image* routine has also been adapted in various ways. Initially, I used this instruction in an attempt to take students' thinking further by having them expand on their colour selection in writing:

- Use the lines provided below to add at least five sentences to explain your selection of this colour. You will need to write about the connections you make between the colour and the idea, and to describe what the colour reminds you of which is related to the idea. Include some words which describe the colour you have chosen.

Not surprisingly, this led to one part of the instruction being addressed and the rest overlooked. A better variation for these students is one with a clearer structure, so more recently I have used the following to help them explore their thinking about living in a refugee camp, presented in Deborah Ellis' sequel, *Shauzia*<sup>vi</sup>:



- Use the lines provided below to add at least five sentences in total to explain your selection of this colour. What connections do you make between the colour and the idea?

The connections I make between the color is that sometimes in the summer I feel really hot and angry Just like how Shauzia feels. (Tiffany, who chose red)

I choose the colour Orange because it represents the hot sun, the mud on the floor and how they feel. The Afghan people feel hot and botherd and just whant to leave. (Karl)

I chose yellow to represent the living in the refugee camp because it is very hot and they have a burnt out feeling. (Winston)

- Describe what the colour reminds you of which is related to the idea.

The color reminds me of when I was really sick it was really hot and did not feel very happy and I felt as if I wanted to run away from my sickness. (Tiffany)

The colour reminds me of angar and heat and makes me feel angrey and hot. (Karl)

It reminds me of the sun, a desert and dried out feeling. (Winston)

- List four words that best *describe* the colour:

Angry, Grumpy color, like a fire burning. (Tiffany)

Hot, Angrey, Frustrated, Anoyed. (Karl)

Sunny, Sandy, Firey, Desert-like. (Winston)

Other variations have been helpful to help draw out students' thinking through this routine. At times, where the selected readings have included descriptions connected to specific colour, I have made these colours exceptions for the students in their exploration and thinking. My objective has been to have students reach for the less obvious options in order to stretch their thinking in ways that may be less comfortable for them. For example, consider this passage from *Parvana* , in which we examined one of the ideas - freedom, escape or relaxation:

"In every picture I've seen of France, the sun is shining, people are smiling, and flowers are blooming...In one picture I saw a whole field of purple flowers. That's where I want to go. I want to walk into that field and sit down in the middle of it, and not think about anything."<sup>vii</sup>

Students were instructed not to select purple, yellow, or blue as very obvious choices to represent the idea. With the benefit of hindsight, I would now add green to the list, noting several responses along these lines:

I have chosen (green) because usually when I look outside I see my dog (coco) lying and playing on the grass and when I see that coco looks so happy and free. (Tiffany)

When I'm relaxed the colour green comes in my head...it reminds me of green trees, flowers and grass. (Karl)

The selection of orange in this instance was the one exception:

I choose orange. I thought that it fits perfectly in with escape because orange represents fire and if there's fire around you have to escape. (Paul)

Paul's thinking stretches beyond identifying an obvious connection between the colour green and the fields mentioned in the extract to making a metaphorical connection. Recalling the earlier comments of Winston and Karl regarding Minecraft, I know that these students are also capable of thinking metaphorically. It is important to help the students to enjoy the discomfort of being in a space where the connection to be made is not so obvious, and to take some time to explore the possibilities that this space presents.

Although I had some initial concerns that capturing video recordings may be quite intrusive within such a small group, I soon found in subsequent weeks that students did not mind this. They found it relatively easy to have their paired conversations recorded and it took some further practice for them to feel comfortable with whole group recordings. At times I needed to remind them of the importance of waiting for their turn and exercising restraint. Once they became used to sharing their thinking verbally, they also reflected quite readily on their experiences of using the thinking routines. I asked them about how they found the restrictions I had placed around the choice of colour. There was some grimacing as they recollected grappling with the difficulties this challenge had posed for them, yet they appeared to enjoy this, almost as if comparing war wounds:

I thought OMG what am I going to do now? 'Cause I was going to actually do purple but that wasn't an option anymore. So I did green. (Karl)

I found it hard because those colours are bright and happy colours, so I had to choose a different sort of colour. (Tiffany)

I thought it was horrible because I was going to choose purple as well, but if she had banned orange I would have like, died. But if she had banned green as well I would have chosen white. Because it is the only colour left and it is like, everywhere. (Paul)

It was harder than I thought but then I picked green. (Angela)

Paul's comment suggests that he had concluded that the choice of colour did not matter so much as long as he could think of ways to connect it to the main idea being explored. He is beginning to grasp the infinite possibilities that could become meaningful connections. In a later conversation, Winston even made suggestions about colours that could be excluded next time if the *Colour-Symbol-Image* routine were to be used again to explore a particular idea. He offered these as "things you could do to make it harder".

Following the recording of the conversations, I have posed stems such as these for the students to use to assist with their reflective writing:

- Today I shared my thinking about...with...
- It was...because...

These extracts are quite revealing of students' thoughts about the value of the conversations and the thinking of their peers:

Today I shared my thinking about fighting to survive with Tiffany and Karl. It was nice talking about my thinking because I felt that if I told a number of people they might be toched or moved for what I have to say. Karl shaerd his thinking about fighting to survive. This was intresting because he had really good ideas. (Matt)

Today I shard my thinking about Fighting to Survive with Tiffany and Matt. It was Amazing talking about my thinking because there was so much to talk about. Tiffany and Matt shared there thinking about Change and challenges and fighting to survive. This was interesting because I love lessening to what they had to say. (Karl)

Today I shared My thinking about courage with Winston. It was interesting talking about My thinking because I want to see what

Winston thought of it. Winston shared his thinking about Fear. This was wonderful because Fear is a big thing. I have learnt that Fear plays a Major role in Parvana. (Paul)

Matt's response shows that he understands the value of sharing his thinking and has a sense of the potential of his words to strike a chord with his peers. He has warmly appreciated Karl's contributions. In turn, Karl is learning to savour what others have to say as much as he relishes sharing his own views. Paul's curiosity about Winston's response to his thinking is a heartening sign, too, that he has found his voice and wants to share.

It is evident that the conversations have also enabled metacognitive reflection and facilitated some evaluation of their own thinking and that of their peers. Whilst the language that students use to explore this is relatively unsophisticated, their excitement and interest in it is genuine. One of the challenges in moving forward with the group will be how to equip the students with a broader vocabulary and the skills to find or choose words which most accurately describe their thinking. They are still learning how to use their voices and their ears in conversations about thinking, and the development of their language skills needs to keep pace with this. As we start the final term I am preparing to welcome two new students and I am keen to help them to find their voices as thinkers within a group of eight.

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<sup>i</sup> Ritchhart, R., Church, M., & Morrison, K. (2011) Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding, and Independence for all learners, (244, 245). San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass

<sup>ii</sup> Ellis, D., (2002) Parvana. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin

<sup>iii</sup> Ritchhart, R., Church, M., & Morrison, K. (2011) Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding, and Independence for all learners. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass

<sup>iv</sup> Ritchhart, R., Church, M., & Morrison, K. (2011) Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding, and Independence for all learners, (111-118). San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass

<sup>v</sup> Ritchhart, R., Church, M., & Morrison, K. (2011) Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding, and Independence for all learners, (119-124). San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass

<sup>vi</sup> Ellis, D., (2003) Shauzia. Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin

<sup>vii</sup> Ellis, D., (2002) Parvana, (128). 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin