

What matter I?

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Just between you and I, if you had asked me three years ago how my teaching was going I would have said it was great. I am teaching Prep (the first year of school), which I love, the children are making lots of progress and I think I know what I am talking about. But if you were to ask me now, I would say that I have learnt more in the last three years to improve my own teaching and the learning that occurs in my classroom than the previous six years combined! I am sure this is due to my participation in the Independent Schools of Victoria, Writing Stories Project.

Over the past three years I have been lucky enough to work as part of the Writing Stories Project with both Julie Landvogt and Ron Ritchhart. The teachers participating in this project have a wealth of knowledge, skills and experience. The collegiality is one of its strengths. My time spent with Julie, Ron and the members of the group has taught me many new ideas, strategies, tools and ways of approaching the learning environment. The process of researching what is occurring in the classroom and how to improve it has been invaluable. The development I have seen in my students has been due to what I have brought back to school from this group.

I decided this year to write about how I have shifted control in the classroom to the children. I wanted to share the journey that I have taken over the past three years and the specific teaching strategies that I now implement as part of my everyday routine. Reflecting on how my classroom has changed over the past three years has been very worthwhile. I have had the opportunity to pay attention to how the students have become the beneficiaries of my own growth. I have been able to see how the shift in control has provided the students with the skills and tools to really be the leaders of their learning.

Three years ago I would have said that I was the facilitator of the classroom. I directed the learning but was not the sole educator. The children taught each other and worked together to improve their learning. I realise now that although I thought the children were teaching each other and working together, I was still out the front asking all the questions and providing all the information. Really, although there were times when the students were truly learning together, most of the time I was telling them what to think, say and do. This reflection made me quite uncomfortable as I did not want this to be the case. I wanted to be able to shift the control of the learning to the students. I felt that it was important for the students to really become the owners of their learning journey. I wanted to become the architect of the learning. I wanted to be the designer of the classroom experience that they children took control of.

The shifting of control is something about which I have always felt very passionate. When students learn from each other they have not only opportunities to share their ideas, but also to clarify, question, analyse and build on learning. I quite deliberately implemented specific strategies and tools into the classroom that I thought would make a difference. I endeavoured to give students the necessary skills to be the regulators of their learning. After three years of building the bank of strategies and tools in my own repertoire I believe that the control shift has become very visible in the classroom.

The time spent talking to Ron about protocols and routines to use in the classroom has given me more experience and understanding of their application. I had used many of Ron's Thinking Routines (www.pz.harvard.edu/vt) before participating in the Writing Stories Project; however, this process has increased my ability to use them in a variety of ways with flexibility. The routines have become part of the culture in the classroom, and this has been a key point in the shift of control.

Making a difference through Thinking Routines

Think-Puzzle-Explore and Question-Starts

"Doing the experiment helps me to learn new stuff to answer my questions"
Matt

"Asking questions helps to learn lots of answers" Ray

Thoughts from the Prep students about how Think-Puzzle-Explore helps them

The first year of my participation in the Writing Stories Project focussed on two Thinking Routinesⁱ, *Think-Puzzle-Explore* and *Question-Starts*. I decided to use the thinking routine *Think-Puzzle-Explore* as I knew it would fit well into the science unit that we were teaching in Term Two. I also used *Question-Starts* in a few different formats at the Puzzle stage of the *Think-Puzzle-Explore*. The use of *Question-Starts* was aimed at giving the children a greater understanding of the language used in asking questions. I was trying to scaffold and develop their language skills so that they were able to ask questions of greater depth. I wanted children to be able to ask questions that were relevant and important to themselves and their learning.

Over a series of lessons we worked through these routines to develop the students' ability to form questions. As part of the unit 'I Am a Scientist', children were involved in a variety of explorations and experiments. This unit is designed to allow the children to hypothesise and question the world around them.

Our first lesson was on the human body. These were the students' initial questions about the body:

"I don't know." Sam

"Your body is big." Michael

"What are eyes for?" Talia

"You have two arms." Poppy

"Where is your body?" Carl

Towards the end of the unit we looked at bubbles. These were the students' questions about bubbles after many lessons using the two Thinking Routines:

"Why do bubbles have air inside them?" Ava

"How does the air get into the bubble?" Bettina

"How does the air get out of the bubble?" Marcus

These sample questions highlight the development seen throughout the 'I Am a Scientist' unit. The improvement in language use and depth of questioning is very apparent.

Along the way I used *Think-Puzzle-Explore* and *Question-Starts* in a variety of areas, including Mathematics for the introduction of addition. During our first lesson I asked the children to think about what they knew. It was quite clear no one knew the word, so we played some addition games, including rolling two dice and adding them together, turning over two cards and adding them together, then came back to the *Think-Puzzle-Explore*. They now thought they knew quite a number of things and had questions to ask and ideas for further exploration.

The *Think-Puzzle-Explore* routine leads children through a series of thinking moves that involve them in making and testing hypotheses by experiments. The link in the case of the science unit was very clear and explicit. This was more than just a routine which the children enjoyed; this routine was providing them with a structure that will be useful and adaptable in many settings. The use of this routine along with *Question-Starts* has led to the children asking more questions. In particular they ask more questions of each other, and more complex questions of me.

The children have not only responded well to the use of these routines, but they are able to ask questions that are well structured, show depth of curiosity and are far beyond what I initially thought five and six year olds were capable. They now have the language to be able to form complex questions which adds depth of understanding and natural curiosity. By developing the language of questioning we are providing them with the ability to articulate complex thoughts and questions.

Students have demonstrated greater independence and engagement in both developing and researching questions. This has led to much deeper

conversations in the classroom from the students. It has given students confidence to ask questions of each other, to challenge ideas and not seek the answer directly from me! It has been pleasing to see that they have all become more competent at forming questionsⁱⁱ.

See-Think-Wonder

"It is good because it tells me what the story is about and what is on the page" Chris

"It tells me whether the book is going to be scary or nice" Tia

"It helps me think about the sort of story it is" John

Thoughts from the Prep students about how See-Think-Wonder helps them

Last year I focused on analysing the development of students' questions through their use of *See-Think-Wonder* in book analysis.

We completed sessions with picture story books where we identified what we could see, what that made us think and what that made us wonder. It was interesting to observe how the children worked through this Thinking Routine.

First attempt at asking wonderings about a text:

"I wonder that he is walking home from school," Cooper

"I wonder if he is going to go to the house?" Beau

"I wonder why he is walking past flowers?" Abby

Final attempt at asking wonderings about a text:

"I wonder how the moon got made?" Alison

"I wonder if Thursday goes to a different country when it is finished here?" Oscar

"I wonder if Thursday is only on our planet?" Kane

Following our sessions we often displayed our thoughts, pictures and questions in the classroom, adding ownership to these. We also returned to address our questions as time passed, allowing the children to see ongoing value in the questions they ask and their ability to locate answers and respond. It has been interesting to evaluate the children's questions along the way. The students understand the language and structure that is required to ask questions.

This also added to the depth of understanding about texts. The students are more confident when talking about a text and what has occurred in the story line, through the use of pictures. Again through the use of this Thinking Routine the students have developed further skills they use both independently and with others when discussing texts and topics.

Think-Pair-Share

"It means you learn more things because you can put more things together" Anna

"It helps you to learn by talking to other kids" Ross

"Thinking by yourself helps you learn and work out what you want to say" Gina

"You hear what they know and you say what you know and then you have a lot of information!" Eric

Thoughts from the Prep students about why we use Think-Pair-Share

Think-Pair-Share is a routine I have used previously when I want children to talk to each other about a specific question or topic. It works well with all ages and is easy to implement. However, this year I have been using it as part of everything we do. Whenever we sit on the carpet to start a lesson, I give the class the learning intention, key question or topic and they think about it by themselves before pairing up and then sharing. This happens at least eight times a week. The increased use of the routine has made it a seamless part of our classroom - so much so that when Andrea Elliott (Head of Curriculum at Westbourne Grammar) took my class for a lesson she barely had to ask the children to find a partner and they were already there.

Andrea Elliott took my students for a lesson focusing on 'What makes a good learner?'. The lesson was again using the *Think-Pair-Share* routine. Below are Andrea's reflections on this lesson.

The invitation to work in Julie's room has been a privilege and an honour, which has provided me with further insight into the power of thinking routines. My first visit to Julie's room was as an observer, as Julie used the routine, Think-Pair-Share to discuss students understanding of 'Learning' and who could assist them with their learning.

The second visit was in a relieving role in which I was to discuss with students what it means to be a good learner. Knowing Julie's class and their prior knowledge of the Think-Pair-Share routine I decided to conduct the lesson using this routine. What then unfolded was a perfect example of how quickly young students are able to embed the routines into their own thinking.

Following a brief introduction in which I clarified the difference between 'What it is they need to be a good learner' and 'Who assists them with their learning' I instructed the class to think about what attributes they needed to possess to make them a good learner they all automatically sat in silence and proceeded to 'think'. After several minutes I asked them to turn to someone near them and discuss their thinking. To my amazement all students paired up (except 3) who were happily made into a group of three and began to discuss the topic. As I moved around the pairs, several pairs required assistance to clarify their thinking from an activity they wished to learn to the attributes they needed to possess to facilitate the learning. With this minimal assistance they were then able to focus on the topic. At the conclusion of the paired discussion I asked students to complete their paired discussion and to move into a circle to share their thinking. This transition occurred seamlessly, and automatically students volunteered their thoughts. Their thinking after 6 weeks of schooling gave an insight into the depth of their thinking and focus on the topic of discussion through the use of the routine.

Had I completed this task in another room in which thinking routines were not part of the culture would the depth of thinking of these young students be realised is uncertain. What I was privileged to be a part of was the realisation of a goal of a teacher, to empower her students to apply a taught routine in a new setting, with a different teacher and demonstrate a culture of thinking in her classroom.

I feel that *Think-Pair-Share* has given students more ownership of the learning. They are more collaborative, open, willing to share their ideas and help each other. When they are stuck, even if they are coming to ask me for help, others will often say 'I can help you'. Students are often seen talking through problems with each other and are problem solving together. The benefits of peer teaching are certainly been through the use of this routine.

Making a difference through wait time

"It helps me because I can think in my head" Victor

"It helps me by learning how to think what the answer is" Stephanie

"It helps me think what I am going to write and say" Erin

Thoughts from the Prep students about how wait time helps them

That old saying *silence is deafening* reflects how I felt when I started focusing on wait time. I remember being told at university that when you ask a question you should wait for the response. I also remember thinking that that was quite obvious! How long do you wait for though? Last year I began focussing on my wait time.

I hoped that wait time would make a difference to those children who often sit back and don't participate. It was my intention to use wait time to

encourage students to have the opportunity to process the question or information and I anticipated this would mean more involvement.

The interesting part about wait time is what you notice about the children. In a Prep classroom of twenty-two children about half will always have their hand up to answer a question and of those about half will say they forgot what they wanted to say!

This year has really shown me the importance of wait time. I have a little boy who truly needs it. I am sure that many children need wait time, although there are children who seem to want to answer before you have asked a question! However, this child averages 20 seconds to respond. At first I thought he was simply putting his hand up to be part of the group and didn't in fact have the ability or knowledge to answer the questions. One day in the first term I was sitting with him talking about a book he had been reading and asked him what the title was. The silence was deafening... He could read the title, the book was facing him, the title was just there, however, he could not answer my question.

This really got me thinking. I had been consciously waiting for longer periods of time, but it was not been enough. I needed to speak to students about what happens when we answer a question.

We had a circle time session about answering questions. When we have circle time we all sit on chairs in a circle, myself included. One person speaks at a time and may only speak when holding the talking stick (in our case the class teddy bear). We talked about what happens when people ask us a question, what we think about, how we feel, what we do. We discussed that sometimes we think we can answer but get stuck, forget or need more information. All these are ok responses; however we have to be brave to say we need help or need the question repeated.

Below are comments from the children about what they can say if they are asked a question and then are unsure of the answer or what the question was:

"I need help. Can you ask the question again?" Kane

"I'm stuck. Could somebody help me? I need help." Tiara

"Think first about what the question is and ask someone else for help. " Jack

It has been really good to see the follow up from this circle time discussion. The last student in particular has really highlighted the wait time needed for some children. After I asked him to explain what he could say if he was unsure of a question, he took 40 seconds to respond. A child like Jack has shown me the importance of this strategy. He has something to give to class discussions, yet he needs thinking time. Increased wait time has allowed children to process the question and work through their response. It has also encouraged more children to respond as they feel confident they will be

given the time to answer and that they can ask for help from others in the class if they need it. The children now know that I will wait until they are ready to respond and as do the others in the class. This strategy has seen the group dynamic become patient, respectful and attentive. They give each other the opportunity to think things through without rushing in on top. Now as a class we all wait.

Making a difference through feedback

"It shows me how to make things better" Zane

"I try to do what the teacher tells me by trying again" Sean

Thoughts from the Prep students about how feedback helps them

No stickers. It doesn't sound right does it? Especially in a Prep classroom. Another change to my teaching has been no stickers on student work (well, maybe the odd one). In my first year of teaching Prep I bought A LOT of different kinds of stickers and filled up my sticker box, ready to cover the children's work as that would make them happy at school and want to learn. Now I look back and think 'What was I teaching those children?'. Last year I began thinking more about the feedback I gave students. I started trying to comment about their work, rather than putting on a sticker and saying 'Well done'. I began saying things like 'I like the way you used the lines in your writing' or 'Your numbers are all written the right way'. Upon reflecting on this at the end of the year I realised that this really wasn't completely constructive. Yes I was commenting on something they did well. Was I providing them with the next step? Was I asking them questions to reflect on what they had done? No and no.

This year I challenged myself further, to be constructive in my feedback. It has been a challenge. I have found feedback in Maths to be the most difficult as often the children are completing a task and it is either completed correctly or not. This meant that I needed to be more aware of the kinds of tasks I was providing and also my feedback became more questions for the children. I ask them if there are other ways to answer the Maths problem, or can they give me a different Maths word to use. Although challenging it has simply provided me with more to think about and focus on.

I asked the children why I wrote comments on the side of their page (in the margin). I had written comments such as 'Re-read. What comes next? When do we use capital letters? Can you make it more interesting? And then...'. Below are some of their responses.

"To tell me to make things the correct size. To make it to make sense." Ava

"To get me to check that it makes sense. So I can learn." Lulu

“So I can learn from it. To use tails on letters so I can join when I am older.”
Andy

“So I change my work and do big letters.” Bella

“To remind me to go back and re-read my work to see if I need any other words before I bring it to you to help me.” Ethan

All of the children were able to identify what they needed to do from my feedback. They were quite confident in understanding and putting into action what was being asked of them. The children also took on board suggestions such as looking for more interesting words in their writing. They receive their question or feedback and they head back to their table to work through it. I am constantly putting back on them.

A colleague asked me whether Prep children actually take any notice of the feedback, given that most of them can't read for the first term! My response is absolutely they notice. In first term they ask me what it says, by second term if I hadn't said or written something they would say, 'what do I need to do next time?'. Once I started provided constructive feedback the children were really looking for it.

Further, the children now help each other with the feedback and actions. We began an editing process in partners at the end of Term Three. After seeking feedback from me the children then paired up and worked through the feedback together, offering suggestions and ideas. This was collaborative peer work with my only input at the beginning. Control was certainly shifted through this process.

I still have my sticker box, but now it is for incidental things such as when the children pick up rubbish that was left on the ground or help a friend who is hurt. The interesting point is not one child has asked why they don't get stickers on their learning.

Shifting control

“When we do things with other kids they teach us and then we teach other people and then that means we both know what each other knows!” Ewan

“Because we work together we learn stuff from everyone” Andrew

“We talk more than Mrs Shutie!” Layla

Thoughts from the Prep students about how our classroom works

The changes that I have made to my teaching have seen me hand over a greater amount of control to the students. I certainly spend less time at the front of the room! The focus is on the students and their ability to drive their learning. Although the students are only five and six years old, they have

shown me their capabilities to take on a number of challenging strategies, processes and language.

Through this journey I have been able to observe the many changes in the children's questions, thoughts and behaviours. Sometimes that means stepping back and allowing things to unfold, diverging off the path possibly planned and seeing where it takes us.

Participating in the Writing Stories Project has given me the experience and tools to be able to make changes to my teaching with confidence.

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Julie has a great interest in assisting children to become independent learners. She has completed a Post Graduate Certificate in Education with a particular focus on Gifted and Talented Education and developing thinking skills in children.

As part of her work with Ron Ritchhart in 2011 Julie wrote a story titled 'The Journey from "I Wonder That" to "I Wonder How?"' This built on the work Julie completed with Ron in 2010 where Julie's story was titled 'Fostering Curiosity & Developing Depth: Thinking Routines with Young Children'.

ⁱ Ritchhart Ron, 'Visible Thinking' Project Zero, 2010,
<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/Research/VisThink.htm> (first accessed 18 April 2010)

ⁱⁱ To read the complete story from 2010 and 2011 please see the link,
<http://storiesoflearning.com/Welcome.html>