

Newsletter, Term 3 2008

From the Editor

Dear Colleagues,

I hope your Term 3 is going well! In this edition, Michael Pohl has written an article on developing a classroom culture of thinking. I thank Michael for sharing his work and look forward to further contributions from him. I would like to introduce a new Newsletter section in Term 4, titled 'Student Talk', so I will be seeking student reflections on their schools, programs, special events and academic studies that have particularly engaged them. I would appreciate your assistance in seeking this information and sending to cfrench@was.qld.edu.au.

Chris French

From the President

Semester 2 is in full swing and, since our last Newsletter was distributed, our June issue of the *Australian Journal of Middle Schooling* went to edit and print. All members would have received their copy in the mail. If your school is an institutional member and you have not tracked your school copies, please ask your administrators, whose name the membership may be in, for this valuable edition. Many thanks to Susan Hearfield, our Executive Officer, for bearing the load of publishing the Journal in the absence of a Journal Editor. Judy Barbe, a newly elected Management Committee member, will take on the responsibility of the next publication. Thank you to our contributors and to Judy who is no doubt looking forward to quality contributions rolling in very soon for the October issue.

MYSA was delighted to be involved with Teaching Australia last year with the launching of the Charter for the Australian Teaching Profession. At the end of June, Chris French and I attended the Teaching Australia Network Forum in Sydney. Two representatives from each of more than 40 teaching associations were invited to participate in this two day meeting. The aim of Teaching Australia is to 'sustain a vigorous teaching profession, be able to play a key role in shaping

directions for education and meet the challenges of quality teaching and school leadership into the future.' The objectives of the inaugural forum were to:

- build shared understandings of issues, priorities and strategic direction for the profession and associations
- explore the makings of an effective Network
- provide guidance on functions and composition for the proposed Standards Council.

Throughout the debate, issues affecting the many associations and their members were diverse and varied. Teacher recruitment, retention, pay, changing environment, Y generation and aging workforce were robustly discussed in the workshops. Teaching Australia attempted to summarise the key challenges and actions necessary. There was much discussion on the establishment of a Standards Council. Summaries were presented verbally to delegates and referred back to Teaching Australia for further consideration.

The MYSA Conference Committee has been very busy in organising the 2009 Conference at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre. The ICT theme of connection with our middle years students has enticed some fascinating speakers from both Australia and overseas. They will provide some fabulous and innovative ideas for classrooms. The Conference will feature workshops at the Queensland Museum, Art Gallery, Performing Arts, Sciencentre, GoMA (Gallery of Modern Art) and Maritime Museum. We have called for interested local schools to host site visits and have requested abstracts for presentations. We have also been working on Teaching Team Awards. Please visit www.mysa.org.au for further details. Brochures and bookmarks have been distributed to schools and we look forward to a fantastic and inspiring conference for all those dedicated educators who are passionate about making a difference for middle school students.

Keep up the great work all of you!

Eleanor Nicholson

Developing a Classroom Culture of Thinking — A Whole School Approach

Michael Pohl
Director — Thinking Education
Adelaide, South Australia

Few people concerned with the education of young minds would argue that one of the primary objectives of schooling should involve the teaching of tools for life-long learning. As a result, many educators place a high priority on empowering students with thinking skills such as the ability to reason; make informed judgements; critically evaluate information; think both creatively and caringly. Immersion in high-order thinking, therefore, should be an integral aspect of their learning in every lesson. Schools would benefit from having a framework for **a whole school approach** to ensure the explicit teaching of thinking skills across the primary and middle years of schooling. This would require adherence to a prescribed **scope** and **sequence** for the teaching of thinking that encompasses a wide range of strategies, many of which should be aimed at developing higher order thinking skills.

A classroom culture may be best described as a supportive environment in which specific factors work together in a synergetic fashion to bring about and reinforce the enterprise of productive thinking. In developing a thinking culture, it will be important to provide teaching and learning activities that will:

- empower students with the language, tools and strategies to engage in a wide range of analytical, critical, creative and caring thinking tasks
- provide on-going opportunities for developing, practicing and refining the skills of thinking
- provide instruction and practice in ways of managing, organising and recording thinking
- assist in the transfer of skills to everyday life and situations as tools for life-long learning.

Achieving a culture of thinking across a given educational setting will require more than the efforts of a few teachers occasionally using one or two thinking strategies as a part of their normal classroom practice. A whole-school approach for the introduction of thinking skills at specific year levels or across faculties will have a much greater chance of success in achieving the outcomes.

Developing a thinking culture within a school will require that all teachers:

- establish and use an appropriate language of thinking in their classroom
- are familiar with a diverse range of thinking strategies to use in their own planning and programming
- make extensive use of graphic organisers to assist students to better manage, organise, record and recall their thinking.

Furthermore, in developing a thinking culture within a school, it is expected that all students will be progressively exposed to a range of thinking strategies that will develop their skills in analytical, critical, creative and caring thinking. Students need to:

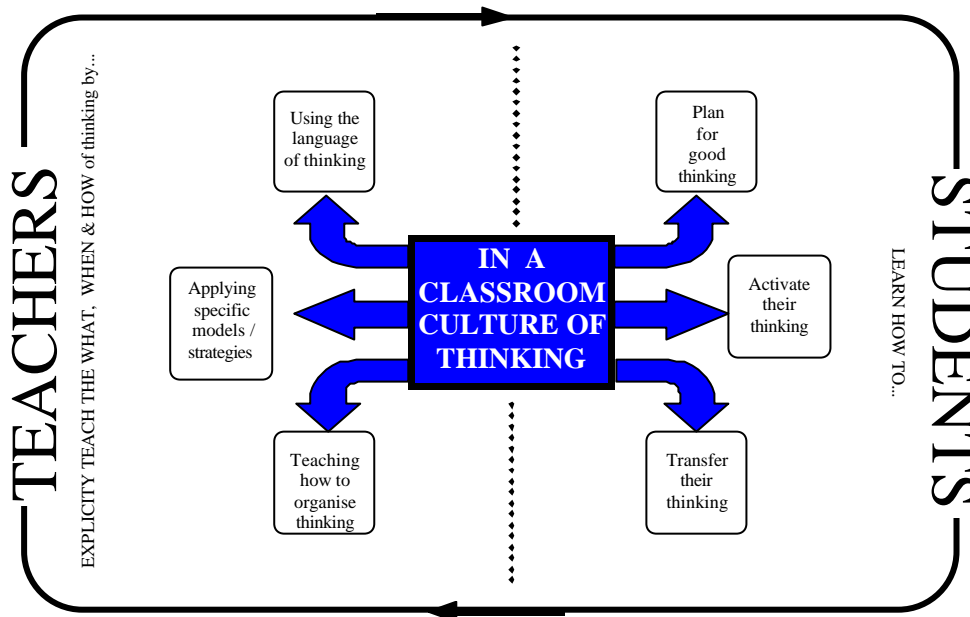
- respond to a wide range of different question types
- frame their own questions using question-generating tools
- use graphic organisers to record thinking and present the products of their thinking
- make decisions and solve problems.

In summary, a culture of thinking is a two-sided coin. One side of the coin is all about what teachers do to develop the culture, while the other side is about what students do within a culture of thinking. Most importantly, both occur within an environment which:

- does not see the teaching of thinking as an add-on to an already overcrowded curriculum
- is aimed at enabling students to reason, think, solve problems and to engage in complex thinking so new situations and unfamiliar problems can be tackled

- is designed to relate thinking and learning strategies to discipline-based knowledge
- encourages students to learn how to learn, become motivated, be self-regulated and lifelong learners
- infuses thinking into all teaching and learning activities.

A CLASSROOM CULTURE OF THINKING



If you wish to explore the possibilities for your school, you are invited to visit www.thinkingeducation.com.au.

Water for Life!

Water: Learn it for life! is an exciting new water education program for schools that has been developed by the Department of Natural Resources and Water. The water wise Queensland initiative aims to create greater awareness of water as a valuable resource and to promote long-term change in attitudes and behaviours in relation to water use by embedding the learning in school curriculum. Developed by Queensland teachers, the *Water: Learn it for life!* curriculum resource will teach students about the water cycle, water conservation, water recycling and purified recycled water. Aligning with the Queensland Curriculum Reporting Framework (QCAR) Essential Learnings, the program offers teachers a complete set of lesson plans and class activities that are organised into four separate year level groupings: Prep to Year 1, Years 2 to 3, Years 4 to 5, and Years 6 to 7. The curriculum materials are supported by comprehensive background information for teachers to ensure they

have all the information they need to confidently deliver the lessons and activities in the package regardless of the year level.

The 'Primary **Connections** 5Es Teaching and Learning' model has been used as a framework to organise and structure the lessons within each unit. An additional component has been added to this model to encourage students to take action as a result of their learning.

A fabulous new edition of *Whizzy's Incredible Journeys* — Pick-a-Path book is also now available. This versatile publication uses narrative fiction to engage students in learning about water conservation and the water cycle. Each Queensland primary school is entitled to a free copy of this book.

To find out more about the program or to access the *Water: Learn it for life!* resources please visit our website: www.nrw.qld.gov.au/waterwise/education or email the Waterwise Team: waterwise@nrw.qld.gov.au.

***Hawker Brownlow Education
5th Annual Thinking and Learning
Conference, Melbourne 2008
classrooms@work***

This conference is definitely one worth attending and I will be there again in 2009! Jam-packed with notables from around the globe, participants were exposed to the wisdom of Jay McTighe (Curriculum Design), Spencer Kagan (Co-operative Learning), Karen Boyes (Habits of Mind), Marcia Tate (Student Engagement), Eric Jensen (Teaching with the Brain in Mind), Ian Harris (Visual Tools and Mind Mapping) and Rich Allen (Dynamic Teaching Strategies) to name a few. The following strategy is just one of many practical activities I took away from the conference. I hope that you find it useful in your context.

Spencer Kagan's 'Sum-the-Ranks'. Co-operative Learning Strategy

This strategy generates numerous possibilities that might be used to solve a problem or create opportunities. The strategy allows all members of a group to contribute and discuss ideas openly. Additionally, it allows the top ideas from each group to be considered collectively.

1. Groups of 4-6 formed.
2. Each group member is provided with six blank post-it notes.
3. Group members are then instructed to write one idea on each note and "announce" the idea by placing it in the middle of the desk and saying it out loud.
4. Once all ideas have been presented, group members select two ideas that have merit (must not be their own idea).
5. Group members then advocate for their selected two ideas by taking turns in presenting the idea briefly and stating why they like it.
6. Once selected ideas have been presented, group members number on the notes of all ideas in order of preference. (If six group members, notes are numbered 12-1: twelve being the highest number and most preferred idea.).
7. Votes for each idea are added and rank ordered.
8. Each group presents their number one idea to the whole group.
9. All top ideas (and other ideas) are collated for future distribution and discussion.

Access Spencer Kagan's On-line Magazine at <http://www.kaganonline.com/Newsletter/index.html>.

Eric Jensen's Brighter Brain Bulletin is a free monthly bulletin and helps connect brain research with practical classroom strategies. To subscribe email: info@jlcbbrain.com.

Nanette Murphy, Director of Curriculum
The Rockhampton Grammar School
nmurphy@rqs.qld.edu.au

Walnuts and Jelly Brains!

I used to think I knew 'things'- but now I know how I learn!

(middle school learner)

As teachers, we want students to be active, independent thinkers and life-long learners. However, we rarely share with young people how learning works. Armed with 'brainy learning', middle schoolers at John Paul College undertake a journey of inquiry into their personal learning style. The Brain Unit is inquiry based and a true learning experience! With their teachers' guidance, students decide:

- what they need to learn
- which experts they need to contact
- how they show what they know
- how to create a learning environment that caters for their individualised needs.

Students collaborate with teachers to establish criteria and assess each other. They report back in a student-led meeting with parents and the teacher. At the culmination of the inquiry, students showcase their findings to the community. Our students know that brains under stress make learning difficult; when we feel stressed our brain-stem takes over.



New or difficult information cannot 'up shift' to the neo-cortex where it can be used. Students learn to minimise stress by developing healthy relationships and managing their day. They become active in developing strategies to recognise stressful situations and deal with them. Students also learn the structure

of the brain by conducting lamb brain dissections. They quickly find out that brains feel like jelly and look like giant walnuts! Scientific inquiry is used to analyse the brain's texture, weight, colour, shape and structure. The students then relate their findings to themselves and their learning and put it all into action. They ask questions such as: 'If the brain feels wet like jelly, it must be made of water so what does it mean for my learning?' Students quickly come to the realisation that brains need water to prevent sleepy and sluggish responses. Other information highlighted includes:

- Brainy food is required for re-refuelling, especially for teenagers!
- Oxygen and moving around in class is vital for re-charging neurons.
- Plants are useful in eliminating bad air from the classroom.
- Deep breathing is important.
- 'Brain gym' exercises allow both sides of the brain to work in unison.
- Smells spark learning! Smells have the ability to wake and warm up the brain, promote creativity, increase memory and be very soothing.
- Natural light is best for young learners; they prefer cool conditions with informal or soft seating.
- Classroom walls are painted in colours that stimulate learning moods. Green encourages harmony and clarity; blue brings rest; and yellow reflects optimism and focuses attention.

All lessons should include activities that cater for visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic learners. The message from the unit is very clear: 'Learning how to learn means knowing your needs as a learner'.

Amanda Kuhnemann
John Paul College - Middle School
akuhnemann@jpc.qld.edu.au

National Curriculum Board Forum

The National Curriculum Board (NCB) has been commissioned by the Australian Government to create a K-12 curriculum in the areas of Mathematics, Science, History and English by 2010. The initial consultation forum of the Board was held in Melbourne on Friday, 27th June and it was my privilege to attend this meeting on behalf of MYSA. The forum was attended by approximately 200 representatives from schools, universities, education authorities and professional associations. The briefing paper for the forum can be downloaded from: www.ncb.org.au/verve/resources/development_paper.pdf.

Summary of major discussion points:

- There was a strong consensus amongst participants that a national curriculum which emphasised a futures and global perspective was a positive move forward.
- Cross-curricular perspectives were explicitly addressed as an essential part of the project, encompassing concepts such as thinking skills, attitudes and values.
- It was acknowledged that past attempts at creating a national curriculum had placed unreasonable demands on primary school teachers who were given unrealistic numbers of outcomes to teach to, measure and report against.
- The danger of over-prescription was a strongly supported theme from by a number of speakers from the floor. The idea of a curriculum 'map' being a central document that enabled teachers and students to make their own 'journeys' was widely supported.
- The concept of a teacher-friendly document was emphasised by both Board members and speakers from the floor.
- Speakers from the floor questioned the return to only four subject orientated curriculum organisers. However, it was pointed out that the Board's remit did not provide scope for this kind of change.
- There was strong agreement that a year-by-year prescription of content was destined to failure.
- It was acknowledged by Professor McGaw that this curriculum would not be the whole curriculum, as schooling addresses more than 'four subject areas'.
- The involvement of teachers in the process was overtly emphasised on a number of occasions and was recognised as a key to ensuring the implementation of the curriculum was successful.

At the time of writing, the consultative forums of the NCB website (www.ncb.org.au) are under development. These will be a point of contact for feedback during the consultative consultation process. All MYSA members are encouraged to provide feedback, thus ensuring the National Curriculum reflects what we understand about the distinctive needs and capabilities of our students in the middle years of their education.

Junn Kato
Vice-President, MYSA
jkato1@eq.edu.au

Regional Reports

Sunshine Coast

Forum: IT Skills through Gaming

Stuart Pohlner presented details about student progress from Year 3 to Year 12 at Pacific Lutheran College in relation to IT skills and learning. From Year 3 to Year 9, IT is a compulsory 'elective' subject taught by an IT specialist teacher. The course provides scaffoldings for students in programming skills and software applications. This approach addresses student engagement, preparation for future studies, higher-order thinking skills and connections with students' real-life experiences. A range of student culminating tasks were displayed. Stuart identified that, at the simplest level, students develop their understandings of the complexity and underlying programming involved in their daily interactions with the Internet and other forms of IT. Other discussions centred on Smartboards, innovative IT use and embedding IT skills in the timetable.

Call for Regional Coordinator(s)

After two years as joint Regional Coordinators for MYSA, Jan Simpson and David Elley have announced they will be stepping aside after the Sunshine Coast's Term 4 Forum. Anyone interested in joining the committee and, in particular, nominating for the role of Regional Coordinator, is requested to contact Susan Hearfield, MYSA Executive Officer, via email at office@mysa.org.au or David Elley delley@saac.qld.edu.au

This is an opportunity to help set the direction for ongoing professional contact and development in the middle years in this region. We hope to confirm the new Regional Coordinator(s) at the Term 4 Forum on Wednesday 22 October at St Teresa's Catholic College, Noosaville. Jan and David wish to thank all who have supported the network over the years, and particularly those who have served on the network's committee.

David Elley
Jan Simpson

Victorian Western Division

Forty one educators from schools, tertiary institutions, social welfare and health organisations attended a professional learning event on 'Positive Education' in the Victorian (Western Division) Branch in August.

Mark Linkins, Director of Curriculum–Wallingford-Swarthmore School District (Pennsylvania, USA) and Co-Director of Positive Psychology for Youth Project, presented the research, theory and practice associated with 'Positive Psychology' and its applications in the middle years. Mark is one of this year's 'Experts' in residence at Geelong Grammar School.

Further information available can be obtained from: Heather Thompson, heathert@ggs.vic.edu.au, or Steve Solomonson, ssolomonson@ggs.vic.edu.au.

