Putting critical thinking into practice: Abbeyfield School, Chippenham

Between 2015 and 2018, 800 teachers took part in free CPD from the Geographical Association and SSAT to develop their understanding and practical strategies for critical thinking; part of the international British Council Connecting Classrooms Programme to develop core skills. A key part of the training is the opportunity to try something out in the classroom and discussing the results with other participants (the plan, do, review model). Teachers from Early Years to the Sixth Form reflected on what they learned from the course and the impact it had on their pupils’ learning, before sharing their learning with others in their school.

Abbeyfield School, an 11-19 mixed comprehensive, hosted teachers from six other local schools in their network for two CPD sessions. Two Abbeyfields teachers attended; both focused on applying critical thinking to improve the level of challenge by developing pupil and teacher questioning. Here they consider the impact of applying the programme on progress and achievement in their school.

1. Classroom application in humanities

Selina Jones founded her action research on prior evaluations in the Humanities department. Lesson observations and other monitoring found that, whilst teaching was very strong within the department, there was scope to improve the level of engagement and challenge within lessons. Moreover, student voice surveys found that students enjoyed their humanities lessons, yet felt that sometimes they could be more involved and challenged in their learning.

Working initially in Key Stage 3, Selina trialled a number of questioning strategies in her geography classroom; these were then adopted and reviewed across the department, and subsequently shared across the school and in local networks. They included:

- improving planning for questioning in lessons, including strategies for starters and plenaries
- developing a tool box of questioning strategies, particularly designed to stretch students
- developing a student learning strategy to engage students in considering and improving how they learn, subsequently applied across the school.

Selina reported clear impacts of this work:

- follow-up classroom monitoring evidenced greater teacher confidence and a wider range of questioning strategies used in lessons
- interviews showed that students felt more challenged and engaged in class, and enjoyed their lesson more as a result.
- students are more engaged in their learning and confident that they will be challenged and able to be successful at GCSE and A Level. As a result, retention levels for geography from Key Stage 3-4 and Key Stage 4-5 are exceptional, and geography results at Key Stage 4 and 5
extremely strong. These outcomes were reflected across the department; due to increasing participation through questioning, students are now more successful and, on the whole, make better than expected progress.

2. **Classroom application in Modern Foreign Languages**

Deborah Wiltshire applied her action research to improving attainment in A level German, in the context of a new AS/A2 specification. A review of teaching practice and school data revealed that students who had performed well at GCSE were under-performing in Key Stage 5. Students’ work on the essays required at this level showed progress compared to their work at the start of their course, but were not good enough to achieve their targets grades at A level. In particular, students needed to produce more rounded and complete answers to essay stimuli, including individual opinions, comparisons and facts.

Deborah taught her students techniques for considering evidence and structuring arguments, including ‘thinking hats’, which they then used to discuss a controversial issue, then evaluate and improve each others’ writing.

The impact on achievement was clear. In the short term, students’ essays were of a significantly improved quality and were more rounded and complete answers. Subsequent essays showed a similar awareness of the need for a balanced argument and were closer in quality to their target grades for the end of the course. In the medium and longer term, this more mature writing style laid important ground work to be applied in the exam, as well as equipping students to be more critical thinkers when faced with situations needing an understanding of the facts, an appreciation of how these may be interpreted by different interest groups and the need for them to come to their own position on any event.