

The Journey to a Culture of Thinking

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The idea that deep and lasting learning is a product of thinking provides a powerful case for the teaching of thinking. Indeed, we venture that the true promise of the teaching of thinking will not be realized until learning to think and thinking to learn merge seamlessly.

Ritchhart & Perkins, 2004

At the heart of education is the desire to learn, the thirst for knowledge, the ability to critically analyse, think creatively and the art of innovation. It is with this end in mind that the thinking classroom incorporates the learning of content with the teaching of thinking to provide students with transferrable skills they can utilize in a variety of contexts.

Through participation in The Ithaka Project, and a commitment by the staff involved to ongoing professional learning at the school level, thinking routines have been embedded into the planning of integrated units of inquiry within our Junior School. Their use has expanded over time and pervades teaching in English and Mathematics. A conscious effort was made by staff involved in the project to demonstrate the use of routines in all areas of the curriculum, with professional learning time dedicated to gallery walks, teaching demonstrations and analysis of student learning using routines. After five years of involvement in The Ithaka Project and following numerous staffing changes, my project aims to gain insight into the use of thinking routines, and whether teachers' use of the routines has developed and become an integral part of the culture of their classrooms.

Ron Ritchhart's stages of development in the use of thinking routines are the focus of my research. How can we as leaders recognise these broad phases of development in teachers and students, and utilise the steps in growth in using the routines to support the development of a culture of thinking? The transition from the initial stage in which the teachers' use is formal, deliberate and often planned as an activity, to the developing stage in which the routine becomes the tool to delve into curriculum content and understandings, and finally to the advanced stage in which the teacher seamlessly integrates, combines and adapts the routines to a variety of settings, made me reflect on the teachers with whom I work and their progression along this continuum. My research is based on classroom visits, samples of student work and the willingness of teachers at the school to share their teaching and student learning with me.

My initial visit was to a Prep class with a teacher relatively new to the profession and the prep level. The thinking routine *See-Think-Wonder* (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, 2011) was being utilised to guide students questioning in relation to the moon as part of their integrated unit 'I am a Scientist' and growing understanding of the world around them. A

stimulus picture of the moon was the focus from which students discussed what they saw. The students focussed initially on the stimulus picture describing elements of the moon.

“The moon is round.”

“There are different colours on the moon.”

Their initial focus on the picture quickly moved onto personal experiences of the moon with no reference to the picture in front of them. “The moon is in the sky.” “The moon is shaped like a banana.” “Sometimes clouds cover it.” The teacher at this stage accepted this divergence from the picture, rather than bringing them back to the stimulus picture to further their insights of what they could actually ‘see’. The statements by students were not expanded upon or questioned to enhance their thinking.

The teacher then introduced the next phase by simply stating the question, ‘What do you think about the moon?’ Student responses were directly related to their own thinking, and the teacher did not highlight links between the thoughts of the students at this stage, maintaining as if to a script of the *See-Think-Wonder*.

The ‘wonderings’ displayed a range of thinking, from one student who stated, “I wonder how long it takes to get to the moon?” to the student who asked, “When are we going to do an activity?” The value of the thinking was not embraced by the teacher and students in such a way that the learning was visible to the student. The learning of the classroom as they saw it was in the ‘doing’ of an activity.

The teacher’s use of the routine was at the initial stage described by Ritchhart; the routine was worked through explicitly, with the routine the focus of the lesson. While the teacher endeavoured to assist students’ responses by reiterating the question, the adherence to the routine in a step by step manner confused some students and resulted in simplistic responses which were a mix of thoughts and wonderings.

The age of the students perhaps plays some part in the explicit nature of the use of the routine, as the need for students to learn the elements of the routine was apparent. However, the natural flow of the lesson was in part lost in the focus on covering the *See-Think-Wonder* in a methodical way. Engagement of students was initially high, but this was lost as they worked through the routine without being able to understand the value or purpose. Even at this early stage in Prep some students’ focus was entirely on the activity, devaluing the thinking and development of collaborative understanding and questions for further investigation.

A part of this project was the reflection with teachers after the classroom visit. As this teacher was in the initial stage, the focus of the reflection was on the recognition that these types of student responses were as expected when initially introducing routines and characteristic of the age and experience of Prep students. While developing her skills with

the use of *See-Think-Wonder* routine was to be an ongoing focus of her teaching, the confidence to restate responses so they are reflective of the routine was a focus of our discussion. The importance of support both through collegiate discussions and professional learning were highlighted by this visit, and the need for leaders to ensure teachers new to the use of routines do not dismiss the inclusion of routines due to initial uncertainty and dissatisfaction as to outcomes. The focus on future use and the experiences of other teachers is vital if we are to fully develop the thinking culture. As Ritchhart and Perkins (2004) state, 'The idea that deep and lasting learning is a product of thinking provides a powerful case for the teaching of thinking. Indeed, we venture that the true promise of the teaching of thinking will not be realized until learning to think and thinking to learn merge seamlessly.'

My second visit was also to a Prep Class and was a direct comparison with the first Prep class. The culture of the classroom directly supported the use of thinking routines. *See-Think-Wonder* was used in this classroom with the cover of a picture story book, 'Where does Thursday go?' as a stimulus to promote questioning. Students were seated in a circle where they could readily view the book. As soon as students saw the cover, several automatically began to discuss amongst themselves what they could see. Two students began their wonderings with 'I wonder if they are asking a question'. The teacher drew the class together, congratulated all students for beginning to share their thoughts and then asked the students who had begun to wonder to share. The student repeated the wondering, which was then prompted by the teacher, 'Why do you wonder that?' 'Because there is a question mark' 'What did that make you think?' 'I thought they were going to ask about the night.' This was reiterated by the teacher to demonstrate the link between the thinking and the wondering- 'So you thought they were going to ask about the night which lead you to your wondering if they were going to ask a question'. The introduction, while explicit about the use of the routine, was not conducted in a step by step approach, but with a natural fluidity from one part to the next. As the students were in their first semester of school, this explicit teaching allowed all students to begin to use *See-Think-Wonder* to focus their thinking and questioning.

Following the 'See' the teacher told the students the title and asked, 'Now you know the title, what are you thinking and wondering?' The next step was to focus on developing the students' questioning and wonderings by the teacher reviewing the types of question starters used for wonderings. They quickly shared the question starters, 'Why, How, If, What, When, Where, I wonder if'. This revisiting of question starters flowed back to the thoughts and wonderings, with students stating their thoughts, 'I think he lost his hat' prompted by the teacher, 'If you think that, what does it make you wonder?' 'I wonder if the bird is trying to find the hat.' While this student's wonderings were directly related to the picture, other students' thinking was more abstract. 'I think Thursday goes to another

country and I wonder if Thursday then goes to another country.’ The culture of the classroom was one in which the thinking of others was valued, with students listening to their peers and extending the thoughts and wonderings of others. The final stage involved the drawing of their wonderings and sharing these with the teacher and their peers. Throughout the session the valuing of the thinking was apparent with all contributions acknowledged. The students naturally moved from their thoughts about the picture into what these thoughts made them wonder.

This teacher is in the advanced stage, with the focus being on creating a culture of thinking constantly reflecting on the routines and how they facilitated the desired thinking. This teacher was confident to adapt the routine while working through the session, encouraging students to make the connection between what they saw, thought and subsequently wondered. The development of questioning was a natural part of this process and entwined in the routine through skilful teaching and experience in the use of the routine. The students were focused on the discussion, as seen by one student answering another’s wondering about the sticker on the cover. The explanation was clear and readily accepted by the child who posed the question, further illustrating the collegiate culture of the classroom. This teacher’s ongoing commitment to developing thinking dispositions drives her reflective practice, which allows for continued refinement and development. As Ritchhart, Church & Morrison state, ‘The routines become embedded in the opportunities that are created, and the expectations for thinking become the drivers of action in the classroom.’”

The delivery of the curriculum in this class is integrated with the teaching of thinking skills. The planning reflects the embedded nature of the routines and their use throughout all curriculum areas. *By combining the direct (routines and structures, and opportunities) and the indirect (modelling, language, relationships and interactions, environment, expectations), a culture of thinking is built and sustained (Ritchhart, 2002).* This culture of thinking prevailed within this class and was the desired outcome since the introduction of routines. This teacher was involved from the beginning of the project and through continued use, reflection and personal ownership of the routines she refined her teaching to create the culture of thinking within her class.

The third observation was of a Year 3 class in which the thinking routine; *Think-Pair-Share*, (Ritchhart, Church, Morrison, 2011) was an integral part of the introduction to a Mathematics unit on time. The question of ‘What is time?’ was posed with students asked to think on their own, prior to turning to a peer to share their thinking. The transition to pairing was seamless with students obviously being accustomed to the *Think-Pair-Share* routine and demonstrating good listening skills. Following the pairing students shared each other’s thinking. Students responses were formatted as, ‘Emily thinks time is....’ Two examples of their thinking are listed below.

‘Rob thinks time is what is shown on the clock.’

‘Sarah thinks it is how we measure time.’

The classroom environment was supportive of the thoughts of others, with acknowledgement given by other students of the definitions shared with the group. These were then combined as a class to generate a definition of time.

After students had discussed all the elements of their definition, two students asked if they could use a dictionary to find out the definition of time. These students’ intellectual desire was demonstrated when they sourced three different dictionaries and pondered over the twenty-six different definitions found and the relation to Mathematics. The inquiry was supported by the teacher and the class as they shared their discovery and as a class refined the definition they had written. The use of the routine was integral to the lesson; however, the routine was not overt and was used as a tool to focus the thinking and direct the learning which occurred.

The teacher and students in this class have moved from the initial stage into the developing stage (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison 2011) with the focus of the lesson being the formulation of a definition of time with the thinking routine being the tool used by the teacher to explore individual and the groups understanding of time. The seamless move between the components of the *Think-Pair-Share* reflected the students’ knowledge of, and experience with, the routine and how comfortable they were in their use of the routine to aid their thinking. As Ritchhart, Church and Morrison state, ‘A common refrain from teachers at this stage is, “I used to begin my planning by thinking about what routines I could use in the unit. Now I think about what kinds of thinking I want my students to do and choose a routine to scaffold and support those kinds of thinking. It may not sound like much on the surface, but the shift is huge.’ This teacher’s planning demonstrated this change in her thinking with a definite focus on the learning she desired. The respect of others thinking and the interest in others’ thoughts within the classroom was evident demonstrating a developing community of learners.

While this teacher is well established in her use of thinking routines, how do we as a school continue to support our teachers and allow this teacher and others to develop in confidence? Through ongoing collegiate discussions, professional learning and reflection, a further shift in the teacher’s thinking needs to occur. This shift broadens the teacher’s attention from, “How do I use these thinking routines?” to “How do I create a culture of thinking in my classroom?” (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison 2011). As a leader within the school this is a question I need to continually ask all our teachers and myself as part of our drive to improve the thinking and learning of our students and develop a culture within the school that, “encultures” students into good thinking practices’ (Perkins, 1993).

While allocating time in the initial phase of implementation for collegiate gallery walks and discussions and ongoing professional learning, we made the assumption we had adequately equipped our staff to move from one stage to the next. While some staff have refined their

skills and embedded a culture of thinking in their classrooms, others are in the second, developing stage; and those new to the school are in the initial phase. Continued professional learning and opportunities for collegiate discussions and reflection is required to continue to develop teachers' confidence and ability to use and adapt the routines within the class to create a culture of thinking. This will be evident when they move from the teaching of a routine to selecting a routine to best support the type of learning they wish to occur, and finally to focusing on creating a culture of thinking. Collectively we need to focus on the culture of thinking of the whole school to 'enculture' thinking through exemplars, interactions and explanations (Perkins, 1993). The journeys of other teachers from our school and others who have developed a powerful culture of thinking are invaluable. Through these we can reflect on our own teaching and not become discouraged and deflated by the challenges that occur. Collegiate discussions and reflective practices are required to change all teachers' thinking from using a routine to developing the thinking culture of our classrooms and in all our collegiate interactions. While routines are embedded into all our planning, this is not sufficient to develop patterns of behaviour that create a culture of thinking. Ongoing focus and development of teachers' understanding is required for us to fully embrace and develop a visible thinking culture. While we have made inroads into developing our culture of thinking the journey continues. While we know the destination, in the words of Jim Collins (2001), *'The real path to greatness, it turns out, requires simplicity and diligence. It requires clarity, not instant illumination. It demands each of us to focus on what is vital – and to eliminate all of the extraneous distractions.'*

What are the ramifications for our school as we continue on our journey to a culture of thinking? To achieve this goal we need to provide clarity and demand focus. 'Creating a culture of thinking is an ongoing enterprise of consciousness raising for teachers and students' (Perkins, 1993) and to achieve this we need to move from the stand alone lessons to develop our students' thinking to a school that fully embraces the culture of thinking by developing in all our teachers a 'thinking disposition'. We need to focus on the thinking that is occurring in all aspects of our teaching and interactions and use the routines to explore meaningful content while developing in students an awareness of the interrelationship between learning and thinking.

'Critical amongst these are the notion that:

- 1. Learning is a consequence of thinking*
- 2. Learning is as much a collective endeavour as it is an individual process.*
- 3. Learning is provisional, incremental, and evolving in nature.'*
- 4. Learning involves continual questioning aimed at uncovering the complexity of ideas.*
- 5. Learning is an active process that entails getting personally involved. (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, 2011)*

Through reflective practice, collegiate discussion, and ongoing classroom visits by colleagues I hope to foster the incorporation of routines that engage students to explore content in depth and develop in our students patterns of thinking that empower them to learn how to learn.

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