

# Getting pupils to take greater responsibility for their own learning during collaborative group tasks

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## Aims of the project

To develop pupils' group work and thinking skills so they participate more fully and take responsibility for their own learning during collaborative group tasks.

## Dimensions of the study

This work took place within one Year 5 classroom of 26 pupils at Birdwell Primary school which has a total of 190 pupils on roll.

The study was conducted over two terms.

## Summary of main findings

In order to develop pupils as independent learners teachers need to develop carefully sequenced cycles of removing and re-building 'scaffolding' in different areas of support.

Visual images are particularly useful in engaging pupils in assessment and reviews of their performance. However, teachers need to be very careful about the selection of images and in thinking about how to make the review process active and critical.

## Background and context

My school had invested in a number of staff attending a Critical Skills Programme introducing them to a series of new ideas and approaches to teaching and learning. Staff had started to use these ideas but some of the more experienced teachers had left the school and others were finding it difficult to implement them in their classrooms. Informal evaluations of the programme's effect within the school had shown large discrepancies between staff approaches and pupils' engagement with the new ideas and skills.

One of the key approaches to developing the curriculum was the idea of the 'Challenges'. In a *Challenge*, groups of pupils are presented with problems, investigations or mini-projects covering

a range of subject areas. Within these tasks pupils are given a specific role such as, time keeper, quality checker etc. and use a range of tools to help them complete the *Challenge* and organise their learning. The *Challenges* are a way of introducing pupils to a very different way of learning and a whole range of new social and thinking skills. They also provide staff with discrete opportunities to develop their roles as facilitators of pupils' learning.

In particular I wanted to explore the following questions:

- What approach should teachers take to gradually removing their scaffolding of a group task in order to encourage pupils' ownership and independent learning?
- What kind of formative assessment processes help pupils reflect on their work in a group and also support the teacher in developing their role as a facilitator?

## Processes and strategies

### ***Observing pupils to identify how they approached Challenges unsupported by the teacher***

The intervention started with me, and occasionally my head teacher, observing the class working on a series of *Challenges*. For example a *Challenge* was often based on previous curriculum knowledge we had taught. In one particular *Challenge* my class had finished a block on script writing for literacy and were half way through their Ancient Greek topic. The *Challenge* tackled a question such as 'Can you use your knowledge of playscript writing to write a new Ancient Greek play?' From our observations we identified a number of problems such as: large variations in how engaged pupils were; pupils having very different views about the value in working within mixed ability groups and pupils with limited group work skills. The observations also showed big differences in their ability to plan the *Challenges* and to take on different roles within the groups. Where pupils found it difficult it often led to me having to be more directive than I wanted to be.

### ***Helping pupils develop their enquiry skills***

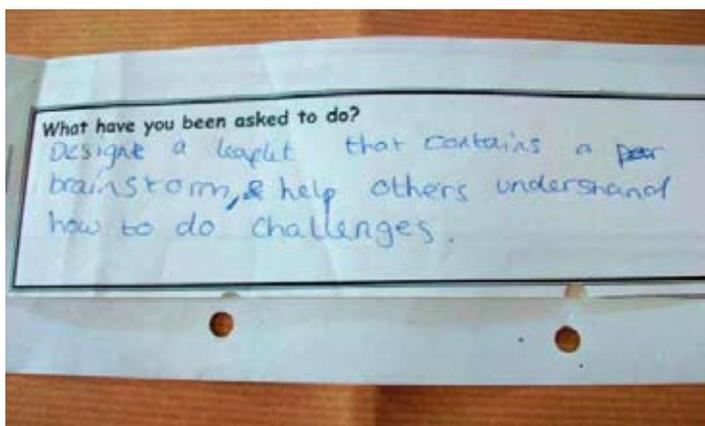
We then focused on two things: the way in which pupils planned each *Challenge*, and how I could help them achieve a better understanding of their role.

We prompted the pupils to think about what they were doing, why, and how they were going to get there. To help them chunk the *Challenge* I asked questions such as: 'What would we see?', 'What would we hear?' Part of the Critical Skills Programme is the use of a wide range of process tools that help pupils work collaboratively. The observable behaviours I looked for in the chunking, included 'Huddling' where the pupils get into very small groups to ensure they can all hear and in turn be heard, or engaging in a 'Sweep' where every member of the team has a turn in giving their viewpoint. Tackling the *Challenge* normally requires them to create some kind of product such as a written playscript to be performed to another class with an accompanying poster advertising their play.

### What further support did the pupils need?

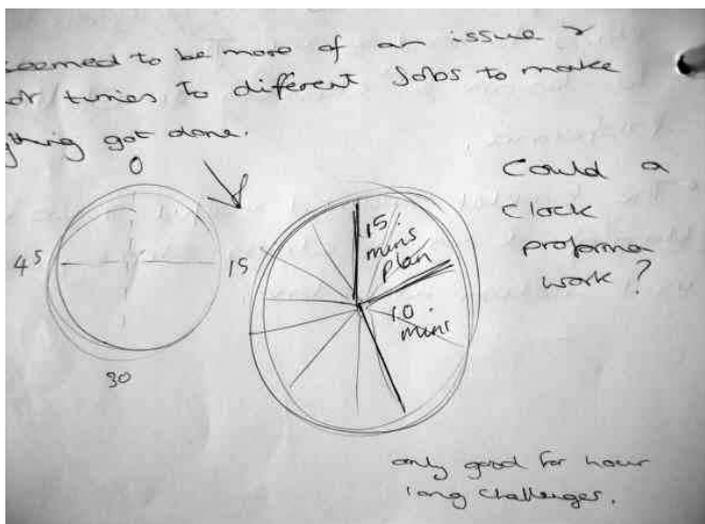
I encouraged the pupils to engage in greater planning and to reflect on how they actually worked in groups during the Challenge.

I offered them a number of planning *proformas* to support them in thinking more systematically about their approach to completing the *Challenges*. I hoped that after they planned with the *proforma* they would work more independently, to such a point that after a while they could work together without the *proforma*. (see below for a sample page of a *proforma* booklet).



(Proforma Booklet)

They had timing issues in tackling the *Challenges* so I designed a *proforma* based around a clock, although they still found the difference between 'real' time and the time spent on the Challenge difficult to grasp.



(Journal entry of the clock proforma)

### Planning together

Working together with me helped the pupils to devise their own plans including one which took the form of a detailed flow chart about how to complete a *Challenge*, in the sense of creating the

end product. However, it placed less emphasis on how to use the 'tools' to get there.

To support them in developing collaborative skills and to change my teaching role from direction to facilitation I provided more scaffolding for the cognitive side of the task. As I removed one form of scaffolding I increased the amount of another form, before removing them both.



### De-briefs of early Challenges work

Before this project began I had just begun to take digital pictures of pupils during the *Challenges* to show them features that I thought would be beneficial to their learning. I presented the photographs in PowerPoints in a series of de-briefs about the *Challenges*. I used them to stimulate debate about how to engage in collaboration. We did a great deal of ground work around rules for giving and receiving feedback.

As the project developed the pupils became skilled in using the video footage in an active sense. Rather than passively watching the film they stopped the video when they noticed something of interest or when they felt someone had made a decision that was important. One group showed part of a videoed session to another group and explained what was going on, what went wrong or worked well.

### The detailed findings

In order to develop pupils as independent learners teachers need to develop carefully sequenced cycles of removing and re-building 'scaffolding' in different areas of support.

Helping pupils become more independent learners required me to slowly remove some of the scaffolding that I initially put around tasks and to introduce new scaffolding as they successfully developed their skills and understanding. This process would, in turn, be repeated before going on to another area for development. The first level of scaffolding involved our modelling of different roles, such as: Facilitator, Quality Checker and Team Rep. I then used proformas, photographs or questioning to help the children, depending on their needs and stage of learning. Through modelling, my head teacher and I were able to show the pupils the specific observable behaviours we were hoping to see. When I was confident the children really understood the various roles and had developed their skills in them I moved on to planning more closely. We used planning rubrics to support their skill development in this area. I then moved onto another area such as individual planning.

Although visual images are particularly useful in engaging pupils in assessment and reviews of their performance teachers need to be very careful about the selection of images to be captured and in thinking about how to make the review process active and critical.

The pupils liked the use of photography and video as part of the assessment process, but except in situations when the pictures 'spoke for themselves' their use needed to be developed quite carefully. What we film or photograph has to contain observable behaviours that pupils can link to skills and understandings.

Pupils can be very uncritical of what they are watching and pupils benefited from using 'Success Criteria' that look at processes as well as outcomes in order to review what was going on in a *Challenge*.

### Research methods

During the research I undertook a lot of observations of groups working on *Challenges* using the framework of skills and tools from the Critical Skills Programme to focus my observations. In addition I used digital photography and video to collect more detailed data. The review sessions with pupils acted as focus groups from which I drew a great deal of information as to their reactions to the proformas and their use of photographs and videos. I kept a journal throughout to help me reflect on what I was observing and to plan for my next steps.

### Conclusions

The most powerful learning for me was to recognise that I had to go through cycles of taking down and re-building the scaffolds that supported pupils learning. I think this is a powerful insight for many of our staff who are struggling with the idea of acting more as facilitators of pupils' learning.

I intend to go on using video within my teaching and am actively thinking how I can apply my ideas on scaffolding to support pupils in using video.

### Suggestions for further reading

*Doing Visual Research With Children and Young People* (2008)  
Edited by Pat Thompson. Routledge



### Author's contact details

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*All conference materials are available at [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp)*

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