



Improving Attendance by Making Meaning

Absenteeism is a difficult issue to get a grasp of. Its causes are often complex and inscrutable. With ever increasing pressure to achieve more with less, it is tempting to think the problem can be solved by imposing tougher discipline or similar hard-hitting strategies. However, where a problem is actually a symptom of systemic malaise, such over-simple solutions are most likely doomed, because they do not address the total situation, and instead reinforce an underlying degenerative cycle.

By **David Hoyle**



In this exemplar from *Making Meaning*, a new book from the award winning Chris Kington Publishing, **David Hoyle** demonstrates how a gentler and more subtle approach using LogoVisual Thinking (LVT) unearthed the underlying causes and enabled the problem owner to discover his own solution. Holding up a mirror made the real causes visible so that they could be addressed. In this way the whole system – including pupil, parents and school, was brought into a more wholesome state and dysfunctional behaviour was eliminated.

Background

Pupil A had developed a pattern of persistent absence from school following a legitimate absence of four weeks for minor surgery. Before his operation, A had been a very bright and able learner (some teachers referred to him as a ‘star learner’), achieving high marks in all subjects. When he attempted to return to school, he realised that he had missed a lot of work and found it hard to catch up; he became depressed and developed a pattern of absence as he opted out of school. A’s absence was a major source of argument and tension at home, and the relationship with his Mum and Dad deteriorated.

The objectives were:

- to enable A to think about the circumstances and events that triggered or maintained his absence from school, in a setting that was non-adversarial and without blame;
- to use A’s ideas and thinking about his absence as a basis for planning how (with support and opportunities) he could change his behaviour and begin to attend regularly.

A wanted to change, but felt blocked by:

- circumstances at home;
- how he felt about himself;
- issues at his school (especially with one teacher).

A’s desire to change and his cognitive and creative abilities appeared to offer a fertile context for him to reframe a problem that he felt was too big for him to cope with.

Activities

An education welfare officer (EWO) and the author had a discussion with A’s parents at home and worked with A himself, in a quiet environment within the premises of the education welfare service. The second and third sessions, involving the EWO and A, took the form of monitoring and reviewing progress.

Introducing myself – a stranger to both A and his family – and obtaining consent from both parties

was very important. In our visit to A and his parents at their home, we had talked about LVT as an approach that might provide a catalyst for A to begin attending school regularly.

Focus

In the session, the EWO and A summarised the discussions that had taken place with staff at the school, and with his parents. A quickly grasped the medium as a means for thinking about his absence – and about how he might resolve the issues he was experiencing.

Gather/organise

A’s task was to use MagNotes (see **TEX** issue 5) to identify and map out what circumstances triggered or maintained his decisions to be absent. He was then helped to identify which factors could be changed easily, which would take longer and which were givens (largely unchangeable structural or organisational obstacles). See figure 1.

Understand/apply

This mapping was used as the basis of planning with A how, with appropriate supports, he could change his behaviour and begin to attend school regularly again. He was actively and fully engaged in both defining the problem and – more importantly – identifying solutions.

In summary, LVT involved A in both the definition of the problem and the identification of the solutions – he regained ownership within his world.

Outcomes

Prior to the work, the problem of his absence was defined for A by others around him – school and his parents. The session enabled him to start from his absence, creating a space for him to define the challenges he faced, and the supports he felt that he needed to meet those challenges.

The plans addressed three main domains:

- **The school** – the EWO acted as an advocate to request a flexible timetable, and a gradual reintegration into the school via the school’s learning support unit (LSU).
- **A’s family** – absence had become a major obstacle between A and his Mum and Dad. The EWO did some whole-family work to identify strategies and responsibilities to break into the vicious, self-reinforcing cycle that had developed.
- **A himself** – his minor surgery had meant he missed four weeks’ school (legitimately) and found it hard to get back into the habit of going to school. The pressure to perform was too much for him. Work by the EWO included helping A to build self-esteem and assertiveness, and take

responsibility for choices. The objectives were fully realised. All agreed that the suggestions represented a breakthrough, and arrangements were made to implement the supports that A had identified that he needed. A was able to use LVT to identify particular domains in his life where he felt additional support might help him begin to attend more regularly, and the EWO was able to offer or arrange the support identified.

The work was undertaken in June, and by February the following year A's attendance had improved from 0 per cent to 92 per cent. He was expected to obtain a number of GCSEs. Relationships within the family had returned to being positive and supportive.

Extension and modification

It is important to recognise that the LVT tools were used in the context of a supported intervention, by two individuals with significant experience of working with young people and their families.

In a setting that included only three people (A, myself, EWO), an A3 board and MagNotes, supported the activity perfectly. However, I would choose to use Visual Concept software, in support of the MagNotes and Post-it notes, in any future one-to-one work. This is because of the functionality, scope and depth that the software allows (e.g. attaching notes to elements).

Following on from the success of the session

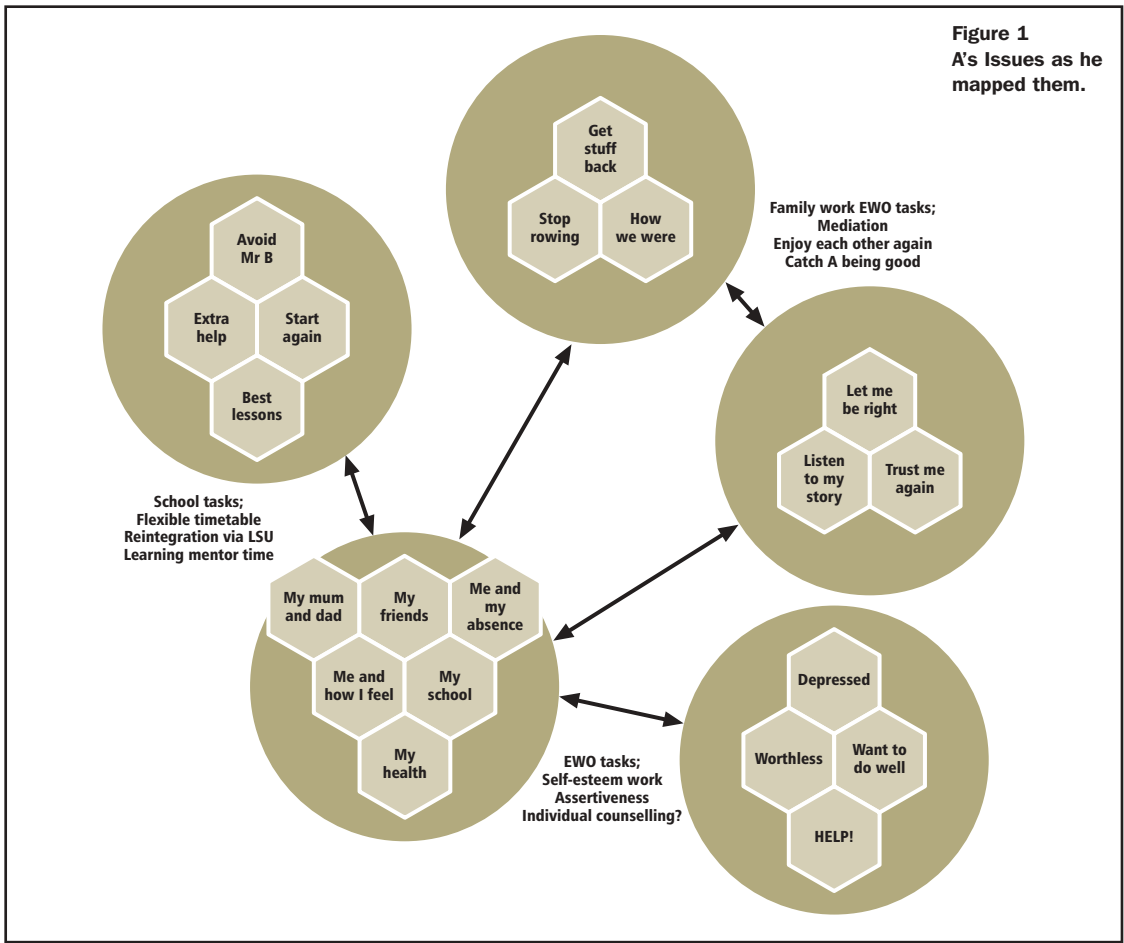
with A, a colleague of the EWO successfully used the methodology with a small group of children to work on their bullying behaviour towards other children.

In this instance experts and learner worked together as enquiring adults. The experts were not there to teach or to train, but to facilitate the learner's exploration of factors that had brought about his difficulties, and arrive at a new understanding. From his new understanding, the learner was able to discover solutions, and because he owned them he was inspired and empowered to implement them.

This process of guided, quality thinking – of meaning making – made visible and accessible by the LVT medium, has applications across a huge spectrum of contexts. It is not limited to individual coaching, indeed significant additional value is derived from the interactions and *democracy* it stimulates in *groups* of learners. Neither is it limited to working with students, as it supports anyone thinking things through. With an appropriate facilitation style and competence it can be used to engage professionals in, for example, tackling school planning and management issues. **TEX**

MagNotes and Visual Concept software are principle tools of LogoVisual Thinking (LVT), developed by CMC. To find out more about the tools, training and methods call +44 (0)1729 830322 or visit www.logovisual.com
See **TEX**, issue 5, Sept 2004 for full introductory article

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