



# A dramatically informed lesson

Confronted with a range of thinking skills approaches and resources, **John McKellar** opted for a combination of education drama and Logo Visual Thinking.... to great effect

I have yet to meet a primary headteacher who would not support the development of thinking skills as a major part of their school's curriculum. Thinking is, after all, fundamental to learning – can effective learning take place if pupils are not challenged to think about their knowledge and understanding? As teachers we appreciate the importance of requiring pupils to think so that they develop the dispositions, or habits of mind, to do so when faced with new concepts or problems.

This is all well and good but issues remain to be addressed when a school decides to advance thinking skills through its teaching and learning. One issue is that despite schools being encouraged to promote thinking and develop its many skills, there is no substantive guidance as to how this should be achieved. It seems that schools are left very much to their own devices when it comes to deciding on what they must do to ensure a thinking skills provision, and this can lead to some confusion. One headteacher I recently visited showed me the pile of information she was sifting through from various publishers all advocating one or another thinking skills programme or resource pack. What, I enquired, was her criteria for selection since they all seemed to be promising to achieve the same outcomes? She had no ready answer. And this leads onto the second issue - have teachers been encouraged to consider what thinking skills actually mean and once understood, how they can most effectively be embedded into their practice?

As my headteacher colleague had discovered, there is no shortage of materials and approaches designed to promote and develop thinking skills. The danger, however, in adopting a specific method or programme is that the essential shift in teaching and learning towards a thinking culture is less likely to occur. This is why we still hear of schools where thinking activities are timetabled to take place during "Golden Time" on a Friday afternoon as some kind of treat. The fact that thinking skills permeate the National Curriculum and the Strategy documents in a thematic way and are not identified as a target activity per se, gives strength to the argument that they are most at home when infused across the curriculum. Infusion enhances the conceptual understanding of subject content by inviting pupils to actively think about it, and when thinking is infused across the curriculum pupils acquire, rehearse and develop the vocabulary and dispositions associated with thinking skills. It is only when consistent thinking activity percolates through all aspects of the curriculum that learning cultures can be changed.

11 Primary schools in the East Cleveland EIC Action Zone have been supported during the last three years to integrate thinking skills into whole-school teaching and learning. They have approached this mission through an extensive programme of staff development that has considered thinking skills from several different – though related – perspectives, the main ones being:

- developing models of enquiry-based learning
- paying due regard to the processes involved in seeking outcomes
- reviewing the Learning2Learn literature and strategies
- developing Community of Enquiry & P4C skills
- engaging in educational drama
- using Logo-Visual Thinking tools

Any one of the above would provide ample challenge as well as opportunity for a school to develop its thinking skills provision and although there is merit in discussing them all, I wish to focus on the last two – educational drama and Logo-Visual Thinking. These two developments, I feel, illustrate how thinking skills are best positioned within every day teaching and learning and demonstrate the advantages of combining different approaches to create a seamless thinking-oriented curriculum.

Educational drama is enjoying a renaissance of sorts within the primary sector due partly to the National Literacy Strategy recognising its potential for developing communication skills across the key stages, and partly to Excellence & Enjoyment in promoting its use to address aspects of social and emotional learning. Its use, however, is often limited to employing drama techniques or

strategies aimed at helping pupils interact with specific subject content rather than being taught as a unique learning experience in its own right. On the one hand it is good to see these techniques being used and pupils certainly engage in hot-seating, conscience alley, role-play and so forth with enthusiasm. But to limit drama to a set of utilitarian techniques is to miss its potential as a medium for thinking, for drama, in essence, is about confronting and resolving problems in an imaginary

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context that nevertheless engages the cognitive and emotional intellect on many levels and usually at the same time! Drama taps into those unique qualities that make us human – we suspend disbelief through imagination, transcend

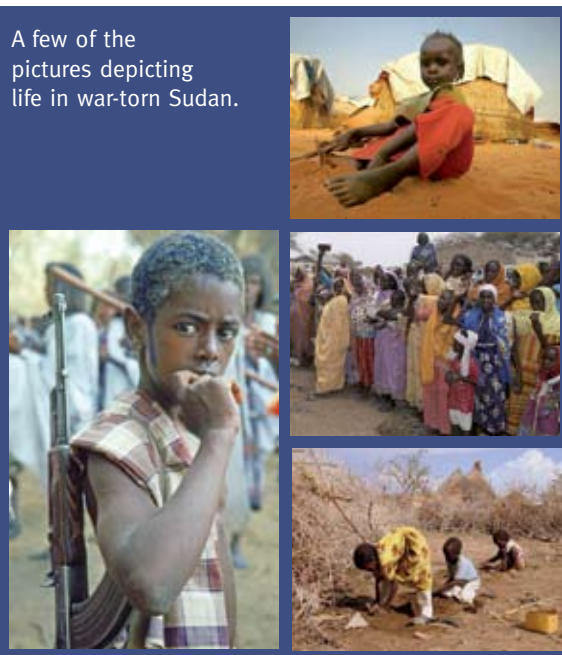
both time and space, adopt attitudes and feelings alien to ourselves and in this make-believe context think through major universal issues of love, greed, revenge, forgiveness, birth and death....the list is endless.

I will share examples of pupils engaging in thinking through drama very soon, but first a word about Logo-Visual Thinking and an explanation as to how this aid to thinking became attached to my drama activities.

Logo-Visual Thinking ( or LVT, for a full description go to <http://www.logovisual.com>.) is a set of tools consisting of A1 size magnetic boards and a number of 3-inch dry-wipe hexagonal shapes ( mag-notes ). Pupils in a group write on the mag-notes in response to a stimulus, initially setting their individual thoughts onto the board which they later, in collaboration with others, review and cluster into categories of statements, ideas, concepts, opinions or questions. The tools offer an easy way for making thinking visible enabling pupils to re-shape and re-construct their meanings by physically moving the mag-notes around the board. The magnetic quality of the hexagons makes it easy to display group outcomes enabling pupils to refer to their work when they come to present it to others.

In the context of helping schools develop whole curriculum thinking these tools provided a concrete support and methodology for pupils to collaborate and engage in a range of thinking activities. Their low-tech simplicity meant that pupils from Y2 upwards were using them to share ideas, create new meanings, make decisions and present their conclusions. They enabled collaborative thinking to become established as part of every day classroom learning because content could be discussed within a process and for a purpose. It was the reported success of the Logo-Visual tools that prompted me to consider if they could be utilised to develop and support thinking through drama. Could Logo-Visual thinking be the precursor to a drama where pupils explored issues, raised questions and drew conclusions in a purely cognitive way that could then be further explored and developed within the emotional context of a drama? If so, I would have gone

A few of the pictures depicting life in war-torn Sudan.



some way to achieving seamless thinking from one activity to another thus providing pupils with wider contexts for their thinking and a greater range of challenge.

My first opportunity to explore this process came with a class of Y5 pupils who had been discussing the Sudan, its civil war and the plight of its people. The teacher wanted her pupils to experience some empathy with those caught up in the war whilst acknowledging the fact that their lives were very different from our own. This was a challenging remit that needed pupils to appreciate differences in cultures and the impact that war was having on people's lives before reference to the drama stimulus could take place.

The drama start was a narrative poem that told the story of a village whose men had been forced to leave their homes to fight in a war. The village struggles on, but predictably, the soldiers return to take the male children as well. A mother pleads for her son and the commander relents but only after substituting the boy with her daughter who would be traded for weapons. Pupils had read the poem and discussed it prior to the drama but had not engaged in any direct work on it.

I began by using the Logo-Visual tools having provided groups with a number of photographs of Sudanese villages, soldiers and refugees taken from the internet. Children were asked to spend a few minutes reading the photographs, and sharing comments if they wished, and then to write on mag-notes their

thoughts, ideas and questions about the lives of these people.

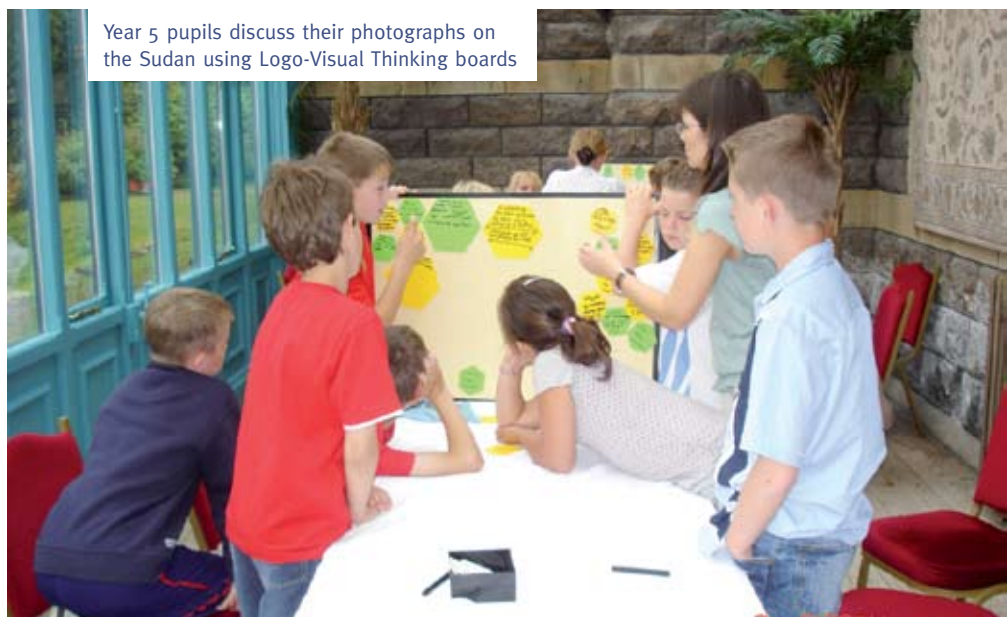
Pupils later clustered their ideas into categories and titled each one as a summary of what was being said. They then presented their work to each other referring to their comments displayed on the LVT boards and to the photographs as they did so. By the end of this first session the pupils had successfully:

- responded individually and collectively to visual materials
- provided a range of personal comments and questions
- read and considered each other's comments and questions
- collaborated in sorting comments and questions into meaningful clusters
- summarised each cluster's information by giving it a heading
- prioritised their questions
- organised the headings and themselves for presentation
- conducted a presentation of life in this part of Sudan
- chose a question to ask of the whole group

The range of thinking stemming from this process is self-evident and during presentations further discussion took place that enabled children to justify, qualify, substantiate and question what had been interpreted from the photographs. By the end of this first session, children had a firm awareness of the context in which the drama was to take place.

Using a narrative poem offers many possibilities for developing an episodic drama but I wished to focus specifically on two areas: (a) developing a day in the life of the village, and (b) facing the villagers with the return of the soldiers. These selected verses may help illustrate the focus areas:

Year 5 pupils discuss their photographs on the Sudan using Logo-Visual Thinking boards



And so we lived and toiled as seasons measured time  
 And Namiyah provided with strength and courage,  
 Through all our days of thirst and hunger  
 For such is our never-ending story of want  
 Until that fateful day

A soldier - commander came seeking new men  
 Came seeking Namiyah head of our house  
 To fight for freedom and the mother- land  
 To die as Samatar our father had died  
 In our never-ending story of war.

Amandi, our mother, forgot her place and pleaded  
 That Namiyah her only son be spared:  
 "Great chief," she cried, "be merciful!"  
 "Samatar, father-husband was taken  
 To fight and die for the mother – land  
 Who will head our house, provide and protect,  
 If you take away my only son?"

The soldier-commander sat still and thought  
 Looked closely at mother then Namiyah then me  
 And presently said, "Mother, I hear your plea.  
 But everyone must sacrifice for the Cause  
 Which is greater than one small family.  
 You wish to save your son and offer nothing?  
 You think to live among others who give?  
 That shall not be, that cannot be.  
 So, woman, you can keep your only son  
 The Cause will take your daughter instead  
 To sell for money to buy bullets and guns."

Here, then, is where my story-prayer begins.  
 Before the sun casts its first shadow  
 Over our village and home I must depart.  
 What will happen to me I do not know  
 So I close this story of my family and my home  
 And another story begins.

The first focus area was established through discussion with much reference to the Logo-Visual material and the poem. So, we agreed roles ( including characters mentioned in the narrative ), status, physical layout, family ties and so forth. Once agreed, the drama began with freeze-frames, and after a brief introductory narration the village came to life.

During the course of the day, the soldier – commander (teacher-in-role) arrived with his henchmen and played out the scene where he rounded up his new recruits. He listened to family pleas, took what little goods families offered in exchange for their sons but took them anyway, patronised, bullied and threatened – a true despot. When he retired to a house to rest the villagers had time and opportunity to consider their actions. A secret meeting was called and the situation discussed. Little time was available which necessitated clear and forthright decisions that all could accept. It was evident that the desire to protect family and home overcame dangers and fear and so in the end the desperate villagers decided on a plan to over - power the soldiers and make them prisoners, their fates to be decided.

Post-drama discussion can resemble a Community of Enquiry but with the added benefit that participants comment from an empathetic and emotional point of view

as well as an analytical and evaluative one. The discussion that ensued highlighted the children's acute sense of injustice that was being perpetrated against them and even though they could identify the dangerous consequences of their actions, they felt the right decision had been made. Needless to say, this particular issue opened the way to explore universal themes such as morality, love, courage, community and so forth – and justice, since the decision of what to do with the 3 soldier - prisoners had to be decided. The decision as to their fate ended our drama in true democratic style with a vote for the 2 options: (a) death or (b) kept as hidden prisoners to labour in the fields since the village was short of men. You can ponder on the outcome!



I felt that time spent with the LVT tools enabled this drama to develop, helping to set the context by raising awareness but also in helping to establish a requirement for pupils to think about their actions both within and after the drama.

My next example made use of LVT to help develop children's knowledge and understanding of clans in preparation for a performance drama focused on rituals. Materials for the rituals had been prepared along with guidance and pupils were challenged to use these materials and their LVT thinking outcomes to develop their performance. The drama, though somewhat structured, presented pupils with an active problem-solving activity that would require an assimilation of information, a range of decision-making and creative thinking.

The class of Y6 pupils whilst reading the novel *Wolf Brother* by Michelle Pavin, had become particularly interested in the concept of clans which features highly in the book. Their teacher asked if they could do a drama with clans as the main focus. After a brief discussion with the class I soon discovered that their idea of a clan was synonymous with that of a gang. I wanted to avoid going into a drama with such a narrow definition fearing that we



would lose the motif of legend and earth-spirit that flavours the story. Some preliminary work on clans was called for prior to the drama and the drama itself was structured around two contrasting rituals they would construct and perform.

Preliminary work required providing a resource bank of information about clans from various countries, cultures and historical settings which the pupils read and discussed in small groups. Using the Logo-Visual tools, groups noted down everything they now knew about clans, sorted their knowledge into clusters and then titled the clusters with a statement that presented their findings.

After a good deal of cross referencing where pupils checked their statements against source material, scanned texts for further information, selected, rejected and re-stated information they eventually agreed on a set of findings clustered and titled ready for display and presentation to the whole group. The results showed that pupils thoughtfully combined their prior knowledge about clans with the new information gleaned from resource materials.

An impressive array of thinking was evident during this process as pupils had to find ways of interacting with the information provided (pictures as well as written texts) then ensure they understood its content before transferring and organising it onto the Logo-Visual boards to reflect their own meanings. In the end, information was formulated, classified into clusters, summarised and defined to be presented in a plenary. The outcome of

the plenary was to provide the class with a display of information and interpretation about clans that they could refer to and make use of at their leisure as they developed their performance rituals.

The class divided into two groups and each was given information about their clan and about the ritual their clan performed. Artefacts and additional materials accompanied the information – masks, sacks, fake snakes, robes and face paint – which pupils could choose to use or not. The two clans contrasted significantly in their use of ritual – one being designed to unite and promote the clan as a society, the other designed to perpetuate control through strength and power. The following extracts provide a flavour:

### The Raven Clan

Our Clan lives in a village in the forest. We take our Clan name from the Ravens that nest in the tall trees that surround us. Ravens are smart creatures, always alert to danger, excellent hunters and gatherers for food, and loyal to one another. We adopt their fine virtues into our Clan and are proud to call the Ravens our brothers.....

All Clan members must undergo the Flocking ceremony when they come of age. It cannot be avoided. If any Clan member refused they would be cast out and left to wander the forest alone but it is unthinkable that anyone would refuse to be marked for it is a moment in life that all Clan members look forward to....

For the ceremony the whole village circles in a gathering and the Fledgling to be marked is presented to the RavenWise council. The challenge of four tests is explained:

- One for the head
- Two for the wings
- One for the body of the Raven

### The Viper Clan

You never see the Viper until the moment he bites – then it's too late. He slips away unnoticed while you watch the poison do its work as one medicine after the next has no effect....

Our chief is Varnon and he has commanded the Viper Clan for many years ever since he challenged and killed Caldred our last chief. It is allowed for any Viper to challenge the chief but the challenge is dangerous and requires long preparations and suffering.....

The challenge is made before the whole Clan where the Chief is insulted and mocked by his opponent and his supporters. This is the Calling.... Once the Calling is made a FangFight is held between the chief and his opponent.....

On the day of the FangFight the chief and his opponent choose a viper from the sack gripping it below the head so its fangs extend from the hand like a dagger ... a death blow is made when the fangs pierce the skin .. Once an opponent is defeated in the FangFight their supporters at the Calling are held captive until the Trial. It is during the Trial that the Clan decide if these members will be loyal to the Chief...

Performing each ritual challenged pupils to make decisions about: roles, sequence, continuity, space, actions, visual representation, and audience – staff were on hand to help with organisation but the decision-making responsibility was with the clan itself.

Pupils coped extremely well and completed their rituals to their own satisfaction. They were aided initially to appoint a chairperson to lead the regular meetings held to discuss and review planning and responsibilities for the development of scenes. The outlined rituals provided to them were “fleshed out” with their own ideas some of which referred back to their earlier work with the Logo-Visual boards. Teachers provided support as and when requested but more often than not used these occasions to help pupils think through the problems for themselves. For the Viper Clan, an intricate dance drama was developed to illustrate the FangFight which was a spectacle of movement and meaning and a fitting climax to the scenes that went before.

These two dramas owed their success partly to the fact that pupils had engaged in contextual thinking prior to moving on to thinking within the drama itself. I have always subscribed to the belief that drama is about thinking and have sought ways before, during and after it has taken place to ensure that pupils work at a cognitive as well as an emotional level. The success of using LVT tools as one more level and avenue for thinking as part of drama will help sustain my own practice and, hopefully, illustrate to colleagues that it is okay to approach drama in this way – it’s not all action all of the time!

One final note - the examples discussed here took

place during a drama workshop day where pupils focused without interruption between 9.00am and 3.00pm. The seamlessness of the thinking process was therefore more clearly evident and pronounced. At the time of writing, I am working with a Y5 class in their classroom developing a drama about changes to their village environment. We have used Logo-Visual thinking to generate ideas, have moved onto drawing plans from these and will next be creating a village environment in the school hall as a context for the drama. So far we have met on three occasions each lasting one and a half hours and the drama will require at least another hour. The thinking process pupils have followed seems unaffected by this prolonged time frame and I believe that that is because, for them, the thinking has been continuous within a meaningful context making it easy for them to re-engage. Most classrooms will face similar time constraints and it is encouraging to say that so long as thinking is constructive and developmental, integral to pupils’ learning, it will transfer effortlessly between its episodes and its format.

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John McKellar - July 2008

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