

Thinking about the 'how?'

Steve Padgett explains why LogoVisual Thinking Kits offer a dynamic medium of thought in English at Key Stage 3

They're very strong on the what, but not so clear on the how,' bemoaned a colleague the other day when we were talking about the advice and help teachers are being given about thinking skills. It must be said that there are hows out there but they need to be carefully selected and, what is more, they have to be the kind of *hows* the teacher can relate to in the subject context of their everyday work.



What my colleague said is quite true and there is a danger that many teachers do not appreciate the practical implications of ideas they learn about thinking skills. Here is an issue rather like *Language across the Curriculum* later to become *Literacy across the Curriculum* and other cross-curricular themes: all very laudable but often too vague to be implemented effectively. The difficulty with having a subject-based curriculum is that teachers do see things in pigeon holes and cross-curricular issues tend not to be valued as they should because they don't appear to belong to anyone in particular. Teachers are very practical people and respond positively to innovations and ideas that will demonstrably help them to do their work and fit into their teaching styles. Something that asks them to make root-and-branch changes to their styles is not going to carry the day unless it is imposed – or very, very good.

What we need is a tool kit that will allow us to encourage thinking skills within the context our subjects, something that has a light touch, something that allows us to weave it into our own pedagogy, something that encourages thinking skills without the medium interfering with the message, something that skills rather than deskills the teacher and empowers the pupils.

One of the most important ideas that pupils need to become aware of is just how much they can control their thoughts and use them to good effect. They need to be made aware that thinking is part of the process of problem solving and looking at new relationships within the context of the broader picture. They need to be made aware of the thinking process and see more clearly the relationship between process and product than is often the case. The *LogoVisual Thinking Skills Kit* (with its board, MagNotes and pens) provides an avenue for this. Here is a tool that facilitates an effective thinking process while allowing for light-touch teacher intervention in support of the pupils. The *learning* rather than the methodology is placed centre stage. The pupils are doing – therefore they begin to understand. Of all the approaches to developing pupils' thinking I have tried, including Edward de Bono's CoRT tools and Tony Buzan's MindMaps, LVT gave my students the most encouragement to think aloud in groups and the least number of constraints to the ways they chose to make meanings.

LogoVisual Thinking

I was introduced to the idea of *LogoVisual Thinking*, through using a *Thinking Skills Kit* in a meeting I attended a year ago. At first I was sceptical about it: the kit seemed to want me to think in a way that was unfamiliar. I felt challenged but, at the same time, liberated as I willingly suspended my disbelief and got stuck into the exercise with my colleagues. After a while, I realised that I had spent time thinking in a

different way – one that was more collaborative than I was used to. I also began to see the potential of the *Thinking Skills Kit* as a classroom tool and decided to investigate further.

Here was the *how!* And, it seemed to me that it would not be too difficult to use the kit in some projects I was working on at the time. Here was a very practical way of encouraging thinking skills. Fortunately, there were some kits available for me to use at the Excellence in Liverpool Teacher Library. All I had to do was the planning.

The first impression the teacher gets when using the LVT kit is how quickly the pupils become engaged with the task. The boards themselves are appealing and the pupils need only the lightest touch in terms of guidance as to how to get the most out of the kit. The next impression

What is LogoVisual Thinking?

LogoVisual Thinking elaborates its methodology from several premises. Firstly that we make meaning by exploring connections and revealing patterns – looking for similarities and differences, establishing causes and effects and so on. Secondly, that if the constituent parts – information, problems or ideas are made visible and movable, we increase our capacity to make sense from them. Thirdly, that visibly expressing our understanding helps us to review and refine it through discussion with others. The 'five stages' of LogoVisual Thinking, stimulate the process:

- Focus: Selecting an area of study or a guiding question.
- Gather: Generating the raw material and making it visible.
- Organise: Experimenting with, and forming, the sense that can be made from the material.
- Understand: Articulating the insights revealed.
- Apply: Transferring the sense derived to the intended outcome, whether it be through writing a text, organising an event or making a decision.

The process of gathering, organising and re-organising ideas can be achieved in a variety of ways. Sticky notes can be used on a tabletop or on a large sheet of paper. On the other hand a more attractive, tactile and re-usable system called 'MagNotes' is available for sale. This includes sets of magnetic dry-wipeable notes (MagNotes) and portable magnetic whiteboards (Magboards). The hexagon-shaped notes facilitate the clustering of ideas and the whiteboards allow for titles, arrows and notes to be written and refined, and for small groups to cross-present their thinking.



is the quality of the contributions that each of the pupils begins to make. Some make the mistake of trying to write too much on each of the MagNote hexagons, but they can easily be counselled away from that. From that point, the pupils move quite quickly into the *organise* phase of the work. This is where the creativity and thinking takes place as they have the opportunity to work at making relationships in a kinaesthetic as well as a visual way. They willingly explore and change perspectives and from this comes new connections and relationships. The kits allow pupils to refine their connections. At all stages of this process I feel that the pupils gain support from the kit and also from each other through meaningful dialogue.

A project on Macbeth

My first victims were year 9 pupils, about thirty in total, from three different schools. I had been working with them on the SATs Shakespeare paper as part of their G&T booster programme. One of the problems pupils have in responding to the Shakespeare paper is the planning out and writing of effective responses to the questions. In order to achieve the higher-level grades, the pupils need high levels of analysis. I saw the use of the LVT boards as a way of helping them plan and analyse. The question was posed: 'What do we know about the character of Macbeth by the end of Act 3 Scene 4?' I was looking at three things:

1. How effective the LVT boards would be in enabling the pupils to gather and organise their thoughts.
2. How the LVT boards encouraged the pupils to work together in order to share their ideas and begin to see new relationships between the pieces of information they had generated.
3. Finally, I wanted the pupils to write about what they had discovered.

I wanted to see if the use of the LVT boards would have any effect on the quality of the pupils' writing. The end product was quite interesting. Pupils wrote quickly and in a focused way. Their writing was coherent and quite elaborate. Some pupils wrote much more than was usual for them. There was a feeling that having seen their thoughts on the board, they were able to write elaborate and more confidently and in a more organised way. The language they used was more fluent than had been the case before and their coverage of the topic was more thorough. Tommy, whose reluctance to commit to paper was well known, wrote:

'We see Macbeth's character change a lot from the start until the end of Act 3, scene 4. Firstly he is a brave, successful warrior with everything at his feet. The BIG change happens when he meets the witches who tell him he is going to have everything.'



The preparatory task using LTV was, essentially, an information gathering and organising exercise – though some rudimentary analysis did take place. The discussions that surrounded the exercise, as the pupils decided what categories should contain their items of information, were revealing. The quality of this work was clear to see and suggested that further work developing into analysis would be valuable.

Creative writing in year 6

One of the most enjoyable and uplifting experiences that I have had in recent years was when I took part in a gifted and talented year 6 residential weekend recently. This was a creative weekend themed on *Millions*, Frank Cottrell-Boyce's novel. My 'literacy input' was to elicit a creative response from pupils. I thought immediately of using the LVT kits. I was anxious to see how year 6 pupils would respond to them. The result was a wonderful collection of poems written by the pupils. After the 'focusing' process had been completed we used the LVT kits in small groups as the pupils moved through 'gathering' to 'organising'. The pupils' responses throughout the sessions were astonishing. The levels of discussion and decision making within the groups was incredible as the pupils used the boards dynamically and imaginatively, moving to *synthesis* and the creation of their poems.

In groups of fifteen, the pupils had one ninety-minute and one three-hour extended writing session. The shorter session took the form of a shared-reading task with discussion and included other exercises encouraging responses to the reading. The material was three extracts from *Millions*. The extended writing session would be based on one of them.

There were four learning objectives: working together, using collaborative and exploratory talk, gathering and organising thoughts, making notes and preparing a written outcome (a poem). The teaching looked something like this:

- **Focus:** Shared reading of an extract from millions.
- **Instruct:** The workings of the thinking board were described to the group and the session objectives explained.
- **Gather:** Key question: What did you see, hear and feel when you saw this happen? Children gathered their ideas on the boards by writing on the MagNotes. This was the 'messy thinking' bit.
- **Organise:** Children decided on what the category headings should be and how the MagNotes should be organised for best effect.
- **Synthesise:** Discussion about what poetry is and what it can look like on the page. Ideas about the intensity

