What is teaching thinking?

This ezine begins to explore the idea of 'teaching thinking'. It raises key questions and concerns about how something as complex as 'thinking' can be described in order to make it accessible and visible for teachers, tutors and students.

Introduction

It is difficult not be become confused by the diversity of behaviours that are classifiable as 'thinking' - the thinking process is a vast and intricate family of activities. We can think logically, creatively or critically. We can think consciously, as when we talk ourselves through a problem, or sub-consciously, as when we daydream or wake up with a good idea. Thinking can be a vocalised, social process, or a hidden, inner dialogue. Further more, not all thought is dependent upon language – an architect or sculptor might think through ideas by modeling and remodeling, and visualisation is often a component of effective planning.

Educationalists have attempted to offer some categorisation that begins to make sense of this variety. Perhaps two of the most familiar to secondary school teachers in England will be Bloom's taxonomy and the taxonomy of thinking skills published as part of the QCA 'Leading in Learning' initiative.

See linked resource 'Two thinking skills taxonomies'

Taxonomies of thinking: some concerns

As you may have noticed, taxonomies such as these consider only those types of thinking that can be easily articulated and measured. They tend, therefore, to over-simplify the wonderfully complex thing that thinking is. The QCA PLTS, and the Scottish 'Curriculum for Excellence' frameworks are examples; the thinking behaviours that they include are predominantly those associated with purposeful, deliberative, vocally articulated thought. Some have argued that it shows a strong bias towards the kind of thinking that promotes participation in a democratic society, or the kind required for 'problem solving at work', linked to the 'production' of solutions or ideas. While there is nothing inherently wrong with pursuing political and economic imperatives, we should perhaps also take care to give our students time to experience and reflect on those other dimensions of thinking, as exemplified above, which are less easily articulated and measured, and therefore all too often ignored.

Thinking skills – proficiency is not enough

As well as thinking skills, you will also find examples of learning 'dispositions' embedded in the various curriculum frameworks that exist. Teaching thinking cannot mean only

imparting particular 'skills', for that would mean regarding people as skilled thinkers even though they may never, or only rarely, use these skills. Most programmes and approaches for teaching thinking work on the basis that one must not only teach skills but also encourage the disposition to use them – proficiency is not enough: there must also be a tendency to exercise that proficiency. These dispositions are not themselves skills, but they do represent a readiness to use them. Examples of such dispositions, which are both cognitive and affective in nature, might include: respect (for others and for the procedures of enquiry); open-mindedness (readiness to consider alternative views/explanations); and courage (to offer a point of view, a counter-argument, a justification etc.)

The dispositions referred to in many given curricular frameworks are seldom explicitly highlighted as such, or differentiated from the thinking skills that they also describe - this would be a useful activity for and schools and colleges to do to ensure that this crucial aspect of 'teaching thinking' is not overlooked.

See linked resources 'Thinking Skills and Learning Disposition Bricks' and the related 'Bricks Activity Sheet' for activities designed to get students talking about thinking skills and learning dispositions.

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