The thought that counts

A new learning process nixes the notion that a teacher is always right, write Wendy Barel and Simon Brooks.

What lessons from school do we want our children to remember as adults?

That phrase is commonly used constructions, generally employed in a conversational context and consisting of a verb plus a prepositional phrase. Or that a quadratic equation is a univariate polynomial equation, which can sometimes be solved by factoring or completing the square?

Do we want them to remember how to score well in standardised tests, including NAPLAN and the Higher School Certificate?

Or would we rather our children become engaged, curious, open-minded, strategic, reflective, inquisitive and metacognitive thinkers who take responsibility for their own learning? People equipped with the thinking skills and dispositions to thrive in an age where facts are free and it's what we do with knowledge that counts?

These big questions were addressed at Masada College's Developing a Culture of Thinking in Schools conference, featuring Harvard University's Dr Ron Ritchhart as its keynote speaker.

For five years, Masada has worked to develop its own culture of thinking, an approach to learning vastly different from the traditional, spoon-feeding approach to teaching.

It's an environment in which thinking is valued, visible and actively promoted as part of the day-to-day experience for students and teachers. That Masada's conference attracted 250 like-minded teachers from all over Australia and New Zealand reflects educators' interest in discovering how they might turn their schools and classrooms into cultures of thinking.

So what actually happens? Using a wide variety of thinking activities, or "routines", students deepen their content learning and perform high-leverage thinking moves. Originating from Harvard, these routines are simple structures used to facilitate thinking that become part of the fabric of classroom culture. Examples include "What makes you say that?", "See Think Wonder", "Connect Extend Challenge" and "Creative Questions". Through these students are led to observe closely and describe what's there, make connections, build interpretations and capture the essence of ideas. They consider different perspectives, form conclusions, ask questions, uncover complexity and reflect on how they have changed as thinkers and learners.

In thinking classrooms, teachers focus on valuing students' thinking and resist the urge to play "Guess the Answer". All of us have probably been on the wrong end of this age-old "teaching" strategy at some time or another, probably at the hands of a very well-intentioned teacher.

This is how it might play out in a year 7 science lesson.

Mr Jones: "So class, how would you make the decision about who should receive a heart transplant?"

Hands up please... Yes, Michael.

Michael: "Give's mine, Michael."

Mr Jones: "Well done. Michael. But not quite what I was after. Any other ideas... Yes, Usha!"

Usha: "Give's answer."

Mr Jones: "Very interesting, Usha... Anyone else?... Jake..."

Jake: "Give's answer."

Mr Jones: "Thanks for that, Jake but not what I'm after. Anyone else?... Yes, Met..."

Met: "Give's answer."

Mr Jones: "Excellent, Met. Just what I was thinking.

What sort of message about thinking is being transmitted to the class through this teacher-student exchange? Perhaps without realising it, Mr Jones is letting his students know only one type of thinking is truly valued in this classroom. His own. How might this be avoided?

Let's replay the scenario.

Mr Jones: "So class, how would you make the decision about who should receive a heart transplant?"

Think about it with your partner and get back to me in three minutes." (Three minutes later.)

Mr Jones: "So, Susan, what do you think?"

Susan: "Give's answer."

Mr Jones: "I was particularly interested in your idea that... (highlights aspect of answer). What makes you say that?"

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The shift in culture is clear. In a culture of thinking, teachers do not use questioning to highlight their own thinking. Instead, questioning becomes a tool to expose and value the thinking of their students.

By using the thinking routine, "What makes you say that?", teachers encourage students to explain their thoughts and move beyond the "answer" into elaboration and justification.

Contrary to popular opinion, our examination system does not favour those whorote-learn their essays and regurgitate them under examination conditions. As much as anything, the Higher School Certificate is a test of students' ability to answer questions, evaluate, hypothesise, justify, discuss and create.

As educators, it's our responsibility to ensure that students truly understand how to think in this way not only in order to secure examination success but also to guarantee success beyond school and lifelong learning.

As we guide our children through their schooling, how should we be assessing their achievement? Not through the quality of their answers but the culture of their questions.

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