

## IDEAS IN PRACTICE 4

This professional development booklet offers ideas for innovative planning in English teaching. It could be used by individual teachers, colleagues within an English department, local authority personnel working with teacher groups or initial teacher education lecturers to support their work with student teachers. Although the examples included here focus on teaching English at key stage 3, the underlying principles of innovation and critical enquiry are readily applicable to key stage 4, and to primary classrooms.

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# Introduction

*Gabrielle Cliff Hodges*

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## Thinking afresh

The ideas in this booklet have their origins in a professional development course for English teachers based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. The title of the course was *Planning for Innovation in the Key Stage 3 English Curriculum: Creativity and Critical Reflection* and, as the wording suggests, its principal aim was to take a fresh look at planning in English in the early years of secondary schooling. A new version of the National Curriculum (QCA, 2008) and a more flexible approach to assessment had recently opened up opportunities for innovation. The teachers who joined the course - some very experienced, some recently qualified, from a mixture of secondary and middle schools across the region - valued the chance to work together, planning for teaching and learning that would stimulate and challenge their students and rekindle enthusiasm for English within and beyond the classroom. They were keen to devise teaching sequences which grew not only from their own particular interests as subject specialists but were also informed by key concepts in the National Curriculum: creativity, cultural understanding, critical understanding and competence.

## A sense of place

A binding theme for the course was 'a sense of place', including how writers, readers, viewers, film-makers and other creative artists use verbal and visual language to construct and re-create imagined places and spaces. Two full-day Saturday conferences, one in early March and one in late April, included presentations and workshops on related topics: the English classroom as a place for learning; film and landscape; poetry and domestic spaces; and Shaun Tan's graphic novel *The Arrival*. In between the two conferences, the teachers planned a very short teaching sequence for one of their classes as the basis for their own small-scale critical enquiry. Group members shared their planning with each other via e-conferencing. The second and final Saturday conference was a rich feast of presentations by the teachers and a chance to reflect on their critical enquiries.

## Enquiry and playfulness

Everyone undertook some pre-course reading. Particularly important was an article by Mark Reid (2006) which he wrote as a contribution to ongoing discussions about English in the early twenty-first century. In it, Reid argues that other curriculum areas such as history, geography or art and design often require students to undertake an enquiry or investigation and to do so with a sense of playfulness. He cites, for example, a unit of work for art and design which builds on the question 'Can buildings speak?' This leads him to ask a question which we found both exciting and challenging, namely where in the English curriculum can we find that same 'twin spirit of enquiry and playfulness' (*ibid.* p. 5)? Our excitement stemmed from the imaginative possibilities that immediately started to suggest themselves to this group of creative teachers; the challenge, however, lay in the sense that two such open-ended concepts as enquiry and playfulness might quickly lead learners too far astray from the teacher's chosen pathway and lose direction. Two further readings, however, helped guide our thinking.

## Conceptual maps and anatomies of quality

Firstly, we found it useful to think about subject knowledge for teaching in terms suggested by Robin Alexander in *Towards Dialogic Teaching* (Alexander, 2008a). He argues that dialogic teaching 'challenges not only children's understanding but also our own. It demands that we have a secure conceptual map of a lesson's subject-matter, and that we give children greater freedom to explore the territory which that map covers' (*ibid.* p. 31). However, teachers also have a responsibility to assess students' progress, offering formative feedback on the quality of their achievement to guide the future direction of their learning. We therefore need a way to keep the planning focused. In 'Thinking through assessment: an interview with Dylan Wiliam' (Marshall, 2002) a gauntlet is thrown down when Wiliam suggests that although English teachers often have a sharp intuitive sense of what good work is, what they tend to lack is an 'anatomy of quality... how quality is built up, what are its components' (*ibid.* p. 56). The point he is making is that being familiar with the broad landscape is not

enough; what is also needed is more detailed knowledge and understanding of how precisely a good poem, argument, story, account, performance is constituted. The combination of a good conceptual map to enable freedom of exploration with a sound anatomy of quality to evaluate the work seems to offer a secure basis for innovative planning.

## **Innovation**

One of the most important things we learnt from the course was about innovation itself. Although much of the teaching we shared with one another was colourful and eye-catching, that was not what made it innovative. Rather, the innovation operated at a deeper, more complex level: the level of thinking. Yes, we tried out different teaching approaches and used materials or technology that we hadn't been courageous enough to try before. But when we reflected critically on what had been achieved and how, it was thinking and thoughtfulness that had made the difference. What did that mean in practice? First and foremost, for this group of teachers, it meant thinking differently about students, trying to see what learning in English might look like from their perspective and developing the planning from there, rather than starting with discrete, prescriptive objectives and squeezing components of English into them. Several teachers deliberately undertook their project with classes who challenged them most. The research, albeit very small-scale, led them to take up reflective positions which enabled them to plan for students as if through their eyes. The effect seemed to be that the students were more inclined to position themselves as engaged learners rather than, say, as disaffected boys or low-achieving girls. Instead, teachers and students alike acquired a greater sense of pride in the work being undertaken which led them to consider how to 'publish' it more widely beyond the classroom.

Secondly, and perhaps not surprisingly, innovative practice was also closely aligned with creativity in teachers' pedagogy. Robin Alexander has defined pedagogy as 'the act of teaching together with the ideas, values and beliefs by which that act is informed, sustained and justified' (Alexander, 2008b p. 4). Pedagogy is not just what we do, but the thinking, beliefs and values which inform what we do. In the English National Curriculum the concept of creativity is described as 'making fresh connections between ideas', or 'using inventive approaches to make meaning', 'taking risks', 'using creative approaches to answering questions, solving problems and developing ideas' (QCA 2008). All these elements could equally be described as informing teachers' pedagogy within the course.

Thirdly, and no less importantly, innovation stemmed from teachers drawing familiar and new subject matter together in creative ways in their small-scale critical enquiries. It involved, for example: exploring the concepts of character, narrative and landscape within different film genres; developing skills of characterisation through creating avatars; investigating the relationship between creative writing and film music; using key concepts from the history National Curriculum to develop high level reading skills. Then teachers analysed their work, drawing on their own critical reflections, feedback from students and sometimes other theoretical perspectives as well.

In this booklet, we describe and reflect on how just a few of the ideas from the course developed in practice. We hope readers will take up the challenge of planning for innovation in their own classrooms, departments and schools, building on and creatively transforming what we offer here with equally exciting results. There are four sections, in each of which we explain how we arrived at the idea for the enquiry, outline the teaching sequence and reflect critically on the outcomes. We hope that each chapter is enough for the ideas to be replicated as departmental professional development as well as in English classrooms themselves.