Wolgarston High School

Visible Learning^{plus}
High School Case Study

CORWIN Visible Learning^{plus}

OSIRIS EDUCATIONAL

Case Study
Wolgarston High School

Cannock Road Penkridge Staffordshire ST19 5RX	13-19 Mixed High School Semi-rural location	Key contact: Headteacher, Phil Tapp

The Issue

In 2014, although our school was improving its outcomes, it lacked a coherent approach to teaching and learning.

The school had tried a number of different initiatives but they were rather piecemeal and weren't embedded across the school.

Pupil behaviour was very good but it was rather passive. There was no shared language of learning and so when asked the question 'what makes a good learner?' pupil answers focused on areas such as listening to the teacher, doing your work and behaving well.

Book trawls found that marking was inconsistent and variable in impact. Whilst teachers were setting learning intentions and success criteria, these tended to be activity focused and were not connected effectively to feedback.

Analysis of the issue

Through observations and learning walks we identified that that the approach to teaching and learning in most classrooms was being driven unwittingly by our data targets. Exam results were being improved through a strong focus on the delivery of the curriculum required for the subject exam and assessment which was dominated by past exam questions. In short,

the school at that time could have been described as an exam factory.

Whilst all of these things have value, we realised that

without change we would quickly reach a point where exam results would plateau,

because we weren't adequately professionally developing our teachers, and nor were we sufficiently developing our learners. When we looked at why some teachers were so much more effective than others, we lacked an effective methodology for doing so, and this made it very difficult to share best practice across the school. There was in some cases an assumption that some teachers were simply better than others, that some subjects were harder than others and some pupils worked harder than others.

Part of the difficulty we had in analysing the problem was that we had no shared language of learning to use as staff and we had no sense of 'where to next?' Responsibility for this lay squarely on the shoulders of the leaders. We accepted the responsibility and were determined to put excellence in teaching and learning at the heart of our school. So, our senior team spent some time doing research in the field of teaching and learning and we kept encountering the same name – Hattie. This led us to all read the 'white' and the 'blue' Hattie books, as they became known. At this point we became excited because we recognised that Hattie's work provided the evidence based approach we were looking for.

Development of the plan

There were a number of elements to constructing our plan. It was identified as essential that we invest in training all our staff. We couldn't do this ourselves and it was vital that the training was of high quality and 'bought in to' by our staff. So we purchased the complete visible learning training package from Osiris and this was delivered over the next two years.

All our middle and senior leaders also read the Hattie 'blue' book. Having become very interested in many different aspects of Visible Learning,

and knowing where we wanted to end up (with consistent, embedded, high quality teaching and learning), the next step was to decide where to focus first. Visible Learning has many facets and we needed to have a coherent journey for our staff. We decided that we needed to increase the extent to which teachers have the mindframe of evaluators who 'know thy impact'. We did this because we felt it would fit well with where we were and help us to develop on from there.

Teachers already conducted lots of assessments and

we collected regular progress data, but we recognised that this was not a proxy for knowing where each pupil was in their learning.

It would act as a catalyst to help us answer the three key Hattie questions: where I am going? How am I doing? and Where to next? At this developmental stage we also recognised that a number of school processes needed to become aligned. So, as leaders we also reflected on the fifth strand of Visible Learning – the Visible Learning school. We made 'knowing thy impact' one of our appraisal objectives for all staff, with clearly identified success criteria.

We also changed our approach to lesson observations in order to focus on the extent to which each classroom was a visible learning classroom.

Observation feedback ceased to be judgemental

but instead was a dialogue drawing on defensible and dependable evidence. The school improvement plan was reconceived to ensure that it was the driver for the development of visible learning.

Implementation of the plan

The key here was to ensure that the Visible Learning approach was integral to everything we did. From the outset we informed our staff that we were on a journey to becoming a Visible Learning school and that all future training and development in teaching and learning would be informed by the Visible Learning approach. For two years almost every training day was used for an instalment of the Visible Learning training programme. This gave shape to our journey and ensured a coherent programme for two years – time for the developments to become embedded. One of the fascinating aspects of the journey was the on-going professional conversations we had about teaching and learning. We realised that a number of things we had done (such as the setting of learning intentions and success criteria and the giving of feedback were far more connected than we had appreciated. They also needed to be much sharper.

We focused forensically on improving learning intentions and success criteria.

Initially they were product success criteria but we found that process success criteria were more helpful in making the learning required visible. The training on how to use the SOLO taxonomy when writing them was very valuable and this has led to much more careful thinking about the balance of surface and deep learning in everything from assessment design to every day questioning in class.

Through observations and learning walks we found that generally too much class time was spent on surface learning and that deeper learning could be squeezed out. Some staff were setting deeper learning tasks for homework which some pupils struggled with because they had no teacher to guide them. Teachers were still asking too many closed questions and were too quick to give the answers rather than expecting pupils to think hard. This led to us recognising that in teaching too much to the exam we were in danger of still spoon-feeding rather than applying the right level of challenge and demand.

After the first year we realised that there was a danger that we would keep focusing on more and more aspects of Visible Learning and might then find that what we had focused on already was not properly embedded. The inevitable turnover of staff also meant we had to ensure that new staff were brought up to speed but without holding back those who had been through the whole programme to date. We therefore decided to draw together a simple overview of our approach which would show the connections between the various aspects of the training.

The key ingredients of our approach were:

• All units must be backward designed (identifying the desired results of the unit and determining what would count as acceptable evidence before planning the learning experiences).

• Every lesson must have clear learning intentions (know, understand, be able to) and process success criteria.

• Feedback is for both the teacher and the pupil and is for closing of the gap between where the pupil is and where they need to be in their learning.

• Assessment should be designed using SOLO and ensuring an appropriate balance of surface and deep questions.

Evaluation

On-going evaluation was crucial to the development of Visible Learning in our school. Because we had decided to invest so much training time and finance in the approach, we needed to understand where we were going, how we were doing and where we needed to go next on a regular basis. Information to inform the evaluation process came from a variety of sources.

For example:
• Pupil voice – annual surveys gave valuable feedback over time on how we were doing and shaped some key next steps. For example, sixth form students could clearly identify teachers with whom they were clear about what they were learning and those who were much less clear. We could triangulate this information with our learning walks and observation.

• Looking at assessments enabled us to see whether backward design was evident, SOLO was being used and whether the balance of the questions was appropriate.

• Book trawls helped us see the extent to which feedback was linked to the success criteria.

• Photographing learning intentions across the school enabled us to share them with staff and peers could critique them and gain ideas to improve theirs further.

Having a clear commitment to training over an extended period of time was very powerful

because it ensured that visible learning became embedded. Because we monitored the extent to which our classrooms were becoming visible learning classrooms through learning walks, lesson observations and appraisal, we were able to collect evidence that we had shifted from being exam led to being learning led.

Pupils could articulate much more clearly what they were learning, how they were doing and what they needed to do next.

Now the external training is finished we continue to ensure that all staff training is Visible Learning based. All new staff are trained. An external Local Authority review of the quality of teaching and learning found it to be strong, confirming what our internal quality assurance procedures had reported.

The acid test for us as a high school was the impact on exam results.

Is there evidence that developing a visible learning approach has been successful?

The evidence is clear – results have continued to improve and

our school has climbed from outside the top 10 up to second out of over 50 schools in Staffordshire for GCSE progress.

We have been in the top quintile of schools for progress nationally for the last 3 years in succession. We have strong exam results across all major subject areas (maths, English, sciences and humanities).

Our A Level attainment has climbed from being in the top 5 to being consistently one of the top 2 schools in the county.

Where to next?

The great thing about our journey is that we never arrive! It is on-going because as we continue to evaluate our practice we can continually see ways to improve further. By always seeking to

develop what works best (rather than simply what works)

we have a clear programme for continuous improvement.

We have decided to focus next on becoming experts at formative assessment. We believe that further work on this will lead to even better teaching and learning and more effective use of assessment. Great formative assessment is the key to 'knowing thy impact' and to effective feedback. Marking also requires further development to ensure that any marking leads to action which leads to impact. As part of this we are placing an increased emphasis on live marking.

We still have more work to do in creating assessment capable Visible Learners. We have made good progress with the concept of teachers seeing learning through the eyes of their students, but we have a long way to go in enabling students to be their own teachers. One of things that makes this more difficult is the fact that students don't join our school until Year 9. However, we are now part of a federation of schools including three first schools and a middle school. All are becoming visible learning schools. This means we can now create a visible learning journey from the age of two to 19.

For more information, please contact:
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