

Reflection on how CPD has developed your teaching in geography

I attended a series of three twilight sessions as part of the GA's critical thinking programme. In the first two sessions we were given the opportunity to engage in some practical activities which were designed to get us to think about different aspects of critical thinking. At the end of this second session we had to design our own 'project' so that we could try some of the strategies out in our classrooms and then report back as part of the third session. In my project my aim was to encourage our Year 11 students in thinking independently and critically about their fieldwork and answers given regarding this in Paper 3.

I think that attending the course has developed my teaching in geography in a number of ways:

- I learnt about the different aspects of critical thinking – becoming better at thinking, making better sense of information and becoming a more open thinker. When I reflect on these I think my students and I are quite good at the first of these but less good at the second and third. It was also important to see how critical thinking could be taught through geography rather than as a generic 'bolt on'.
- I also learnt a range of different practical strategies that could develop these aspects of critical thinking in geography. We had the opportunity to try out these strategies and also to discuss them, so as we did this I was continuously thinking about how I could apply these in my classroom and particularly which students / topics they would be most suitable for.
- Some of the strategies were familiar to me - for example I'd done silent debate before - but some, such as the question grid and argument frames were new. Having a mixture was really helpful. It reminded me of things that I had done before which I could maybe apply in different contexts and also gave me the confidence to contribute to the discussion. However, it also gave me several new ideas which I was eager to try out with my students.

It made me realise that embedding critical thinking strategies is not an extra thing that I need to fit into my already busy schedule, but something that can actually make my lessons more efficient. Very often the strategies only required very basic resources e.g. post-it notes, flip chart paper, and also did not take large amounts of time. I can actually support my students in reaching the higher levels by analysing, evaluating and justifying in a reduced amount of time. I really enjoyed the course and would like to develop my understanding of critical thinking further.

Attachments

<GA critical thinking programme structure>

<Certificate of attendance>

The moderators felt that there was quite a lot of description of what happened and what was learned with only limited reflection on how this will guide any future changes in approach. However, the learning that Critical Thinking should be integrated and not bolt-on is clear and activities stimulate thought on how implementation could be effected within the writer's situation.

Evidence of development of your geographical knowledge or professional practice

The training gave me the opportunity to both engage in and try out new strategies with my class. I wanted to change how I was facilitating critical thinking when doing pre- or post-exam prep and review, in order to push students to think more critically when writing their exam answers. I designed a framework I could use for all exam feedback/prep and, although in the project I have used this mainly for Paper 3 improvement, it has been designed so that it can be adapted to Papers 1 and 2 also. The basic PowerPoint has four stages, all of which aim to encourage the student to think in a critical manner about one specific question.

Stage 1: Thinking critically alone. The students were given a table in which had a variety of statements about their fieldwork; some of the statements were purposely controversial and all designed to make them think critically about their fieldwork. All the statements in the table related to one specific exam question that I was giving feedback about. Initially they were asked to tick or cross the box dependant on whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements. I found this first task helpful as every student had to engage and figure out what he or she thought about their fieldwork independently, without actually realising they were doing that!

Stage 2: Silent debate. Students now had to justify why they thought what they did. The statements were written out on A3 pieces of paper around the room and they had to silently write down what they thought about each statement and why. This was excellently helpful in my cohort of students, as many of them can be reluctant to contribute in class. The anonymity of the task meant the comments written were much freer and critical in nature, creating balanced and justified debate.

Stage 3: Consolidation. As a group or pairs they had to summarise the arguments given on the A3 paper and feedback whilst the rest of the class filled in a table related to the specific exam question the points fed into; in the case of my example, reliability vs non-reliability of fieldwork conclusions.

Stage 4: Structure grids. I then used a simple exam answer structure grid to allow the students to write their own independent answer, based on the critical thought developed throughout the lesson, yet through the structure grid the answer would also have a clear structure.

Attachments

<Lesson PowerPoint>

The moderators felt that the structure that is highlighted is effective. It doesn't provide answers but sets in motion a process that is clearly a reflection on what was delivered in the CPD. It would be useful to have an idea of what geographical knowledge or professional practice were like beforehand so that the drivers of change and development of these aspects were more explicit.

Evidence of impact on the quality of teaching, curriculum or outcomes for students

The reason why I chose this as my project is that a common issue we have faced with reading students for the new GCSE paper is that they are typically fearful and wary of thinking of their fieldwork as something they can think critically about and generally taking ownership of it. They find it very hard to think independently and critically about their fieldwork as this, in their eyes, shows a weak field study; yet this ability to think critically gains many more marks in the exam. The students find it difficult to come up with their own suggestions of weakness and potential improvements of the fieldwork without a high level of teacher support, so the purpose of this project was to empower the students to think freely about their own field study independently critically. The overall aim is to create a critical thinking culture in the classroom.

I picked two simple but very effective methods, using visual scales for 'To what extent...' questions, and the introduction of structure grids for 9-mark questions in order to embed critical thinking frameworks and tools into the daily structure of my Year 11's lessons. Using these methods, I noticed improved essay structure and higher levels of critical thinking in the questions I have marked. The answers generally are more well balanced and students are using higher-level skills, such as justification/evaluation, and more confidently answer the 'To what extent ...' questions. I did a baseline test, which was a past paper, and then at the end of the process I re-tested the students on each question. I found that using the exam question lesson and the smaller tools I have built into all lessons has helped students' access higher level skills such as justification and evaluation. As a consequence this has increased Paper 3 scores – 91% of students increased their question score and the average mark increase was 4 marks.

I also feel my project has had impact on attitudes and the culture in my classroom, as well as progress. It increased the students' willingness to participate and gave students more confidence in expressing their own opinions. It also helped to create a culture where students independently attempt to solve problems in their fieldwork. There is still much more that could be achieved; I would like to use this exam feedback lesson in more than just paper 3 questions and I think that I will need to do more of this type of thinking in order for it to be embedded and natural for the students.

Attachments

<Example baseline test>

<Example test after intervention>

The moderators felt that the impact on student outcomes was clear and demonstrable. A 91% improvement suggests that the changes made as a result of the CPD process were the right ones.

Overall, they were happy that the criteria had been met and evidenced and the GA Professional Award was achieved.