

By Gerald Haigh

An independent girls' school sets out to ensure that its students, already well taught and capable of excellent examination performance, are also independent, enterprising and creative thinkers. It achieves this with the aid of innovative classroom work that makes use of a programme of thinking skills combining this with a huge variety of enrichment opportunities in areas such as sport, drama, enterprise, charity work and outdoor challenge. The students respond in full measure, taking responsibility, as individuals and teams, for large areas of activity, ready to take risks and accept consequences. As a result they present themselves as articulate, enthusiastic and ready to "Go4it" both in their lives at school and as they prepare for higher education and the world of work.

The School

Northwood College, in Northwood, Middlesex, is an independent girls' day school. It currently (2008) has 815 students aged from 3 to 18 years. Most live locally, but the school runs buses for those coming from further afield. Entry to the school is by test and interview. The average ability on entry is above average, but the range is wide, and there's specialist provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. (LDD)

Why is this a Go4it School?

The school's Award submission covers an impressive range of examples of initiative and creativity. For the visitor, though, the most important conclusion is that it all adds up to a school that develops leadership at all levels – among staff and, of course, in its young people. All are allowed – encouraged in fact – to have ideas and then to develop them, gathering supporters, taking risks and making mistakes along the way. There are many detailed illustrations of this in the school's submission, and some are described here. One of the most striking, though, is seen in the Thinking Skills Programme – interesting and enjoyable activities and challenges designed to help children become active learners rather than passive receivers of knowledge.

Thinking Skills at Northwood College

Those schools whose students are mainly high-achievers know very well that ensuring they reach their full potential can be a considerable challenge. Jane Simister, Director of the Advanced Cognitive Development Programme at Northwood College, puts the issue in terms that will be recognisable to every teacher.

"...we looked at our students and realised that, while they were highly skilled at passing exams, and confident of doing well at school, they were in no way prepared for a future that would require them to be creative, risk-taking, independent-thinking individuals, responsive and innovative in the face of change."

The problem, she suggests, is that too often in schools we raise children to be receivers of information.

"We expect children to be active learners – to be diligent, motivated and enthusiastic in their studies – while being passive thinkers – content with being spoon-fed the facts necessary to waddle through the next hoop."

The way forward at Northwood College was to launch, in 2004, a Thinking and Learning Skills Programme. At the heart of it is the concept of "Spiral Thinking" – a cyclical process that leads from questioning, through defining aims and gathering information, through critical, logical and creative thinking, to decision-

making, review and communication and so back to questioning. A graphical representation of the process is seen everywhere in the school, and it's clear that the aim, from 2004 to the present, has been gradually to move the concept from its beginnings in a series of extra lessons in Junior School year groups, to the point where it's embedded in the daily work of the classroom right across the school.

Appointing Jane as a full time thinking skills specialist was bold in itself but as she says,

“It was a visionary move by the head who realised that if it was added to the work of a class teacher it wouldn't have had the same impact.”

Jane defines the work in three closely related parts which, though they currently co-exist, also reflect the stages that the introduction of thinking skills has gone through over four years.

Firstly, outside the taught curriculum there are clubs, events, competitions and expeditions – puzzle clubs, competitions for inventions, problem solving events out of doors. Secondly, within the curriculum are the specific thinking skills lessons. Thirdly, and potentially most importantly, is the embedding of a creative, critical and enquiring approach to everyday classroom teaching.

It's very clear that the growing programme has called for a great deal of professional development work with staff, and the provision of lots of support material in the form of toolkits and ideas workshops. Undoubtedly, too, progress has been unevenly spread among individuals and departments, and Jane is open about the fact that there is more to be done before the most suitable approaches and techniques will have been developed by each department.

Now, though, the results are seen in a student body where leadership, innovation, enterprise and creativity, to say nothing of the ability to have some fun, are all very evident. At any one moment, for example, one form, or year, or informal group is involved in a charity fund-raising project. Invariably these are organised and run by students, with little more than advice from staff and a watching brief.

All of this, and much more, is detailed in the school's "Go4it" Award Submission. To repeat everything here isn't necessary. What's possibly more helpful is to begin with some examples of students showing the kind of "Go4it" attitude and spirit that the founders of the Award have always hoped for and sought.

“Invent”

Northwood College encourages students to think creatively not only in the arts, but in the area of practical invention. So, every year the school has an "Invent" competition. Latterly, the format's been based on the TV "Dragon's Den", with guest judges. The winning duo came up with a device that looks like a pen but is, in fact, a dispenser for nail varnish remover. In the context of a girls' school with a strict uniform policy it's a magnificently subversive addition to the armoury of the girl who finds herself in class still wearing nail varnish from the weekend, and it was gleefully presented as such by Khushali Halai and Jenna Noronha of Year 6.

“Instead of ink, the nail varnish remover comes out and you can use it secretly in class.....”

(The story of this project continues. The girls presented their idea to the Head of Buying for the Beauty Department at Marks and Spencer. She recommended some suppliers and they are currently in contact with them.)

Leadership in action.

Sky Draper of Year Seven is a promising young athlete. Google her name and you'll find plenty of entries. Look more closely and you'll find that at the time of writing her first three current mentions are

respectively for 1500 metres running, cycle road racing and 1500 metres freestyle swimming. Unsurprisingly, she features also as a triathlete.

Some young club athletes are perhaps understandably focussed on their own careers, maintaining a tenuous relationship with their school's sporting scene. Sky, though, is very different. She knew there was a programme of cross country races for school teams and she was disappointed that Northwood College wasn't competing.

"I knew there were some people who could do it. I got them together and worked out a lunchtime training programme, monitoring their progress. We won the team event locally and next year we hope to qualify for the Nationals."

Coming out of her shell.

One of the characteristics of Go4 it schools is that they try to find pathways to success for every student. At Northwood College, for example, there are so many ways by which students can discover and develop their skills both in and out of class that teachers are accustomed to the experience of seeing children show previously unseen qualities of insight or leadership. Year Nine student Lucy Grimes a good example of this, and also shows rare qualities of self-awareness when she says,

"Before I came to Northwood College, I was known as the quiet girl who sat in the corner and never ever spoke or smiled. No one could point at me and say, 'That's the girl who sang in the talent show!' or 'That's her! The girl that plays the oboe.' But that's all the past now. Northwood College, in particular the performing arts department, somehow changed me. It was like taking off a black coat and putting on a multi-coloured one revealing all my potential. Suddenly I had loads of friends, was going to singing lessons and was in every choir possible to join. I have sung solo in a talent show, sung in every concert and done loads of school plays. I am a changed person. I have no idea how it happened but it did all thanks to Northwood College."

Managing Risk.

One of the stepping stones in the "Spiral Thinking" model used in the school's Thinking Skills programme is the quality of "Being tenacious – willing to struggle and take risks."

Teacher Sharon Norris, who runs expeditions for the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme feels that Northwood girls need to be helped to learn about risk-taking.

"A lot of them are city girls and not used to going out into the country and being independent. They don't appreciate that they have very protective parents -- they like to think they're streetwise but they're not really. They haven't had to make decisions that really affect them. For the Duke of Edinburgh Award they have to make decisions and take the consequences, which might mean getting lost."

The Award is only one of many similar challenges – such as Outward Bound expeditions, PGL residential trips, outdoor activities days, "Night Line" walks, raft building and racing, all of which involve team-building, leadership and organisation.

Risky Business

Controlled physical challenges are only one aspect of risk taking. It's at least as important that students are introduced to the kind of risk-taking that's at the heart of business enterprise. To this end the school runs a number of Enterprise projects, one of the most striking stories to come from these being the saga of the "Magic Mugs".

This began when three Sixth Form girls Sita Shah, Rushina Shah and Devonshi Modi embarked on their Business Enterprise project by looking for a product that they themselves found attractive but which also offered value for money and had a unique selling point. They came up with the idea of a mug with a heat sensitive coating. The students describe it like this in the summer 2008 edition of the Northwood College Newsletter.

“Our innovative product, the Magic Mug™, was a ceramic mug with a stunning visual effect! Created by applying a coloured, heat-sensitive coating to the outside of a ceramic mug, the product was then personalised using the dye-sublimation printing process. When hot liquid is added, the heat-sensitive coating becomes transparent, revealing the printed image beneath. As the mug cools, the heat-sensitive coating is restored to its original colour, hiding the image once again.”

Bringing the design to reality meant that the girls had to negotiate a price with a specialist supplier. This they did, and based their marketing strategy on the agreed cost. Then disaster struck when the person they'd negotiated left the company. The firm then attempted to refuse to continue production at the agreed price. Overcoming this, and persuading them to honour the original price took every ounce of the Northwood College team's negotiating skills. They succeeded, however, and the mug sold extremely well.

It's not difficult to see some of the lessons that were learned here about steadiness in time of trouble, sticking together, agreeing on difficult choices, dealing with business people who were themselves concerned to protect their interests.

In the Newsletter, the students sum up the experience in these words,

“Business Enterprise has allowed us to broaden our business skills and in particular, it has provided us with the opportunity to refine communication skills and most importantly to develop our leadership qualities. Through this amazing scheme, we have proved that we have been able to control our finances tightly while sustaining our production and have overcome all the problems we have faced as a team.”

The school's encounter with the “Go4it” programme has encouraged other students to look more closely at the place of risk taking in business. As part of this, those Year 10 students who will be taken into workplaces by their parents as part of the national “Take Your Daughter to Work Day” intend, rather than being passive observers, to investigate the importance of risk in the various businesses they visit. Each girl taking part in the Day took a short questionnaire on risk to discuss with the employer. In time, these will come together in a series of presentations on “Risky Business”. So what is for most participants a straightforward day of observation becomes, for these Northwood College students, more active and purposeful.

Impact

The qualities that make up the spirit of “Go4it” aren't easily measured by tests and examinations. In any case, Northwood College's purpose isn't just to achieve higher grades for its students, but to prepare them well for whatever challenges they're going to meet as they embark on life beyond school.

That said, teachers readily comment on the way that the school's approach to its students shows in their attitude to learning. Janet Johnson, Head of Junior School, says,

“Over the nine years I've been here I've seen the girls become much more willing to be independent - to come up with ideas. They feel if they offer something it will be thought about and listened to and a fair judgment made of it.”

She feels they're better at working together, too, and recalls incidents of students supporting and encouraging individuals who haven't won competitions.

“They can collaborate and value each other’s ideas and be so supportive.”

Perhaps most telling are the comments of the Independent Schools Inspectorate in its Report of the 2008 inspection visit.

“Pupils achieve outstanding levels of knowledge, skills and critical and creative understanding in their subjects and activities, and they learn to apply them effectively.....Pupils enjoy their learning and, through varied and often challenging lessons, develop the essential skills and aptitudes for study.”

“Pupils are challenged to develop their analytical and reasoning abilities through well-structured programmes and initiatives designed to stimulate creative thinking....’

Conclusion

Go4it schools share a number of risk-taking characteristics. In the case of independent schools, it's often a matter of their recognising that life beyond school for all young people, of all abilities, demands more than good exam results. As a result we're seeing more and more already successful schools embarking on "Learning to learn" programmes. (Knowledgeable parents, incidentally, far from questioning such initiatives, or regarding them as a distraction from the core purpose, are themselves very aware of the qualities demanded in today's business world.

Of such programmes, the one on Thinking Skills at Northwood College is exemplary. It's been devised and put into action by a teacher with the appropriate academic background and the right leadership skills. The head's decision to make the leadership of the programme into a full time post – in itself a calculated risk – ensures its success.

The Northwood College "Go4it" award doesn't just recognise the Thinking Skills programme, of course. The school's almost bewildering range of opportunities for children to excel is at least as important. Really though, we're talking about a single vision, driven by the desire of head, staff, governors and parents to see each student launched into life full of confidence, replete with ideas, ready to question, listen and learn and, most importantly, equipped with a healthy sense of irreverence and fun.

'Go4it is a national awards programme that recognises and celebrates schools of any kind where there is a positive 'can-do' attitude. It's administered by HTI Leadership. Details at www.hti.org.uk

Gerald's latest book is 'Inspirational – and Cautionary – Tales for Would-be School Leaders', published by Routledge.