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a pilot project of 8 lessons across social studies: thinking actively in a social context: (TASC)

Abstract

The members of the Social Studies Team were concerned about the high level of student dependency on staff for their learning, and many students seemed to lack the ability to take the initiative. This seemed to be particularly the case when teaching at A level (studies undertaken post 16 years).

Through the support of the Farmington Institute, I was able to begin an enquiry into how other schools in both the primary and secondary sector were addressing this issue, and was introduced to the TASC Framework by Marie Huxtable, the Senior Educational Psychologist for Bath & North East Somerset, UK. The team within which I worked decided to introduce the TASC Framework into our teaching in the hope that this would contribute to developing the skills of learning independently and interdependently. This paper describes the learning journey made by staff and students.

Introduction

The TASC Problem-solving Framework developed by Belle Wallace was attractive because it broke down the stages of thinking required to solve a problem; identifying eight coherent stages that take students through the problem-solving process from the beginning to the end of a project. The TASC Framework effectively provided students with the language to analyse and articulate their thinking stages.

TASC as an evolutionary process

Developing the use of TASC within the Social Studies Team, which includes Critical Thinking, Philosophy and Belief, Psychology, and Sociology, has been an evolutionary process. Our understanding in using the TASC Framework has gradually emerged and is still developing. We have fitted it into our normal teaching schedules with mixed ability groups at Key Stage 3 (students aged 11 to 13 years) and Key Stage 5 (students aged 16 to 18 years). As we have seen the students use the TASC process we have learnt from, and about, them and now can see further possibilities and improvements that can be made.

The TASC Framework is a learning process and this is what provides flexibility that is so different from a content driven curriculum. It's a process that has been used by the departments of Social Studies, Business Studies, Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) and Enterprise.

Initial observations using TASC

The initial experience of applying TASC for the first time raised issues for both students and teachers. TASC was applied to a religion and media module in Year 9 (students aged 14) that was already taught as a project, and it was also applied to a Year 8 module (students aged 13) exploring the issues raised by competing claims for the land of Israel. A different teacher taught each unit but in both cases two common observations were made. Students found the concept of Generating a range of ideas from which the best would be selected, a difficult practice to grasp. In both cases students were impatient to simply get on with the task and were reluctant to generate as many ideas as possible.

A second issue was that students were reluctant to evaluate their work before they submitted it at the Communication stage. Both observations gave us a helpful insight into how our students were working, and has since influenced how we present these two aspects of the TASC process. A third area which made me aware of the need for careful planning was the response I had from students to the Gather and Organise section when considering the competing claims for land in Israel. For many students this topic was beyond the knowledge of many, and therefore one needed to either begin with some general stimulus material or have some significant input which could then be built on in the Gather and Organise stage.

I took these considerations into mind when working with another Year 8 group, and having explained the importance of each stage of thinking, I have not met with the issues raised in the initial introduction to TASC. I am now hoping that the students will be able to independently apply the TASC process to an extended homework project. I now intend to hand the implementation of the TASC process over to the students.

Voluntary TASC Group

From these first experiences in the classroom and conversations with colleagues in other curriculum teams, it was decided to set up a voluntary TASC group within the school. The voluntary group was made up of representative staff from English, History, ICT and Business Studies, Philosophy and Belief and Psychology. We decided to pilot a TASC project entitled 'Differences' with Year 7 (students aged 11-12 years) in their first autumn term at the school. In Year 7 the students in these subjects are taught in tutor groups and so are in the same groupings for each TASC activity. Again this whole process was exploratory and evolutionary. What brought us all together was an interest in the process of learning, although each subject area was also aware of the body of content and skills within individual subjects. The planning and monitoring discussions gave us the opportunity to share what each department taught and also to find common links that students could draw on.

Sixth Form Involvement

Of particular interest in this project was the involvement of the Sixth Form Psychology students (students aged 16 -18 years) who, in the preceding summer term, had trialled the basic outline of the eight TASC stages as they made the transition from lower to upper A Levels. The benefit to the Sixth Form students was that they were being given a problem-solving methodology that could be applied to their upper A level Psychology coursework, and at the same time they would also have to demonstrate skills of mature learners such as

reliability, presentation skills and effective communication.

Some of the A level students were then invited to model their experience of using the TASC Framework to the Year 7 students when they arrived in the new academic year as part of the first two lessons in understanding the TASC process.

Why the title 'Differences'

The title of 'Differences' was chosen to allow two factors to operate. Firstly, students could draw on their prior knowledge from outside school. Secondly, they could begin to link the work that would be covered during the first six weeks of term across History, English, ICT and Philosophy and Belief. The title was deliberately open ended so that students were given the opportunity to develop the theme as deeply and as widely as they decided.

Overall Structure of the project

The project was structured so that each subject taught its normal scheduled schemes of work for Year 7 until the penultimate week of the term prior to the October break. A scheme of eight TASC lessons was devised in each subject which each Year 7 group followed over a period of 7 school days. This was ambitious for us because not all staff attended the voluntary TASC meetings and like the students, we were a mixed ability group of staff.

Preparation

Each member of staff was given an information pack containing: a summary of what each subject had taught during the term, the lesson outlines, a summary of Belle Wallace's rationale behind TASC and some ICT guidance on how students could submit their work on the school network. Year 7 were introduced to the concept of the 'Differences' through an assembly that was delivered jointly by myself and two Year 13 students (aged 17 years) who showed a video they had made as part of their TASC project in Psychology on 'Differences.'

The 8 lessons were as follows:

Lesson 1. Introduction

Two Sixth Form students worked with each teacher to introduce TASC. Year 7 students put themselves into groups and had a task to make one paper hat per group. While making a paper hat seems a simple idea, the purpose was to have a practical activity which could engage all students from all levels and was one that would provide the basis for discussing how groups in this case could go about problem-solving.

Sixth Formers share their own experience of following the TASC Framework with Year 7 students, and model the hats they made as an introduction to learning about the process.

Lesson 2 .Gather, Organise and Identify

Sixth form students showed Year 7 classes their powerpoints or video projects on the topic of 'Differences' they had made during the previous term. Year 7 were asked to produce a mind map showing what they had covered in English, History and Philosophy and Belief so far and their project was then identified and outlined. Year 7 students were encouraged to discuss what would make the project successful and what further questions would they need to ask.

Year 7 students are given the same challenge as the Sixth Form which was to work as a group to make one paper hat. This then provided the basis for a discussion and explanation of the TASC Framework.

'I enjoyed most making the hats'

Lesson 3. Generating Ideas and Deciding

All members of the group were encouraged to contribute and ideas were recorded in their TASC booklet. Each group then had to sort out which were the best ideas and arrange them in order of priority. The Year 7 comments included:

Year 13 students lead a Year 7 lesson on the Identify stage of the process using their experience following the TASC Framework.

'My idea is what older people can do and what they can't do and how age has affected them.'

'Jess' idea was how older people treat younger people.'

'Let everyone be included and hear everyone's ideas.'

'We did not generate very well because we had lots of arguments of what's fair and what's not fair.'

'I have learnt to make sure we put all our

ideas together so it would be fair.'

Lesson 4, 5 and 6 Implementing Ideas

At this stage Year 7 students took on different roles within their group such as leader, scribe, designer and monitor, and they began to plan their ten power point slides on the topic of 'Differences'. Comments were made such as:

'I enjoyed being the leader and making the decisions along with the designers.'

'Working as a team is more effective than working alone.'

'I make sure I don't leave anyone out.'

Lesson 7 Evaluation and Communication

Prior to their communication of their powerpoints, students were asked to evaluate how each one of them had worked in each stages of the TASC Wheel: Had they listened to each other? Been open to ideas? Prepared well? Contributed to the group? and Taken on a leading role? They also had to evaluate how the group as a whole worked, and whether they had effectively followed the TASC process.

As each group gave their presentations the remaining students were asked to assess each group for their originality of ideas, quality of the final work, their level of effort and to record how they allocated marks.

Lesson 8 Communication and Learning from Experience

The presentations continued in this lesson and were followed by the final segment of the

Wheel, which was a reflection on what had students learnt from the experience.

This reflection was structured using the following questions:
What do I know that did not know before?
What new skills have I learned?
How else can I use these skills?
How can I improve my way of working?
How can I improve how I work with others?

Some comments by Year 7 students when they were asked what they had learnt from the experience of TASC include:

You have to make sure that everyone in your group is doing their job otherwise you have to do it for them.'
'Let everyone be included and hear everyone's ideas.'
'I have learned to work in a group and I've got more confidence.'
'I think I have learned how to work well in a group with none of my friends in it.'
'I now know that I like working with other people.'
'I now know what some people in our group are really like.'
'TASC has shown that some people need to be braver and give their ideas.'
'TASC has shown that this tutor group can work together if they communicate.'
'TASC has shown how I and this tutor group can work better in the future by not being so quiet and saying what their ideas are instead of keeping them to themselves.'
'I now know how to get sounds on the powerpoint slides'

What have staff learnt from this experience

This process has prompted much discussion and reflection amongst staff. Through

focussing on the process rather than content it meant that subjects that are usually taught discretely were able to be combined, sharing the common threads. It has also opened up some dialogue between departments that have not worked together before.

By focussing on the process rather than the content it has enabled two very different year groups to work together - Year 13 and Year 7 students. The TASC project enabled Year 13 students to be the role models for Year 7 in the classroom. It also enabled Year 7 students to be working with students from a subject area that is not taught at Key Stage 3 or 4. Year 13 students also had the experience of working alongside staff and at times were taking a lead role in the first two lessons.

Some Year 7 students thrived and were excited by the process and it fired their imagination, with the result that the final power point presentations were very diverse in nature, and some very ambitious. Within one class I had presentations on such diverse topics as: types of music, the legal age at which children could do things from different countries, different forms of transport, and how old people and teenagers are viewed differently.

It also gave some staff an opportunity to see what Year 7 students were capable of early on in their secondary school career, although some staff did feel a few Year 7 students became lost in the process.

Students and staff have both commented that they enjoyed the group work and that they liked the independent learning process. The process encouraged reliance amongst students for the work. The process also increased self and peer evaluation and enabled the teacher to trust students to work in groups for longer periods of time.

The Year 13 students enjoyed working with the younger students in modelling the task set at the Identify stage. The Sixth Form students themselves had to review their own work prior to giving presentation to Year 7. There was some great interaction between the Year 13 students and the Year 7 students in the lessons. As a result of this work by Sixth Form Psychology students, the process will be used again with them, and more time will be spent thinking and discussing each stage of the TASC Framework

Below I have described some of the concerns raised by staff as we went through the pilot project. Some are very obvious with hindsight, and can simply be addressed, and others point towards quite a different way of delivering TASC.

Some staff were concerned that there was too much emphasis on process rather than the quality of the final product in relation to their subject area. Some staff felt we needed to have given more consideration to, not only the process of thinking, but the building of the subject material. To address this issue it was suggested that each of the volunteer subjects should teach each of the segments of the TASC framework within their own subject during the year, and then have a day near the end of Year 7 where the timetable is collapsed, and the TASC process is brought together from beginning to end in one day's activity. The benefit of this is that students would have had several opportunities during the year to understand the concepts of the process, and students after a year of the Year 7 curriculum would also have a greater amount of ideas to bring to a project at the end of Year 7 rather than at the beginning. On the other hand some staff have enjoyed using TASC at the beginning of Year 7 because they have seen skills and abilities in students that they may not have otherwise seen until later on in the academic

year. Having used this process at the beginning of the year I now know I can return to all or part of it during the year and can build on what we have achieved.

There were also issues that arose with the practical logistics of managing the project during a normal busy school week, such as having to deal with lessons when staff were away ill, and simply having enough computers and projectors available for such large numbers of students.

As members of staff, our own understanding of the process is also deepening. In some cases staff needed to have made a greater distinction made between Gather and Generate. We also need to consider how the activity of Deciding could be done, perhaps through a practical card sorting activity. We did not address in detail how to organise what has been Gathered. Concerns were also raised about where we stood on the issue of copyright? Belle has kindly helped us out on this, and advised that we should add © Belle Wallace 2000 underneath the TASC Wheel or Framework when we make our next set of booklets.

Our delivery of the TASC Framework is one of evolution within the setting of our particular school. Each time we deliver it, amendments and refinements are made as we reflect on the students' responses.

We invited a member of the authorities' advisory team, Peter Spain, into the school to conduct a series of interviews with 25 of the Year 7 students who participated in the project. The review described how many students referred to the social context of the TASC framework. Working in groups of four rather than the standard one or two at KS2 was seen by most students as a positive experience. A significant minority did refer

to time wasting and group conflicts as being a negative experience, while some allocated a distinctive role to each group. We need to reflect more on how we manage this. Most Year 7s had seen the benefit of working with the Year 13 students and had appreciated knowing some older students early on in their secondary school career and had felt reassured by this.

Many students felt there had not been enough time to finish their presentations and would have welcomed a wider choice of ways to give their presentations other than by powerpoint.

Peter Spain in his review describes how "Pupils mentioned Generating ideas as one feature which had stayed with them from the TASC Framework". He goes on to say "This is useful as they themselves recognised the temptation to take the first idea and not to develop it further or explore alternatives." Peter also highlighted links that could be made with the new Programme of Study for science in the 2008 National Curriculum and the KS3 Framework with D & T. This review has been important because Peter Spain has highlighted issues and made links with other subjects that have gone beyond our own range of thinking.

Our next stage in our process is to have a formal review of the whole process with staff and students from both Year 7 and 13 together, to exchange and discuss the pilot project.

In conclusion the TASC Framework has given us a process to bring together parts of the school that until now have not worked so closely together, and has introduced a process that can be used interdependently or independently by Sixth Formers and Year 7 students helping them to become more autonomous learners in a social context.

Year 8 reflections on TASC Framework the first time we used the process

'Looked at every aspect of the subject'
'You had a structure to follow'
'Plans out the problem well'
'If you need help you can just keep looking back at the TASC Wheel'
'It can be a more fun way of learning'
'We get to work in groups.'
'Made learning clearer'
'Good way to interact with pupil and teacher'
'Different types of learning – good education source'

'It's not your own plan'
'Hard to understand'
'The headings are weird'
'Needs to be used for every problem not just sometimes'
'Too many steps to follow'
'Some unnecessary stages'
'The tasks are bit out of the ordinary'
'Can be confusing'
'Its hard if you get behind on the schedule'

These are some of the comments I received from a Year 8 mixed ability co-educational group two years ago when I first started using the Thinking Actively in a Social Context or TASC framework as developed by Belle Wallace.