

# Building Bridges

## Case Study

Tinto Primary School

Hillpark Secondary School



## The Context

### Tinto Primary School

A non-denominational school situated in the southside of Glasgow with a role of approximately 300. Despite being in the 'leafy suburbs' the catchment of the school takes in a wide spread of social and economic backgrounds. Having been built in 3 stages, Tinto is open plan in the upper school, semi open plan in the infant department while the middle school has doors! A new head teacher was in place as this project began.

At the outset, our school was unsure of current writing practise and there was not a satisfactory writing programme in place. A project based on New Horizons methodologies had been undertaken by a former member of staff in collaboration with Pauline Scott, an English teacher at Hillpark secondary. This member of staff moved on before any cascading could occur. I, personally, had missed much of the New Horizons input through being on maternity leave twice in quick succession. To compound this, the writing tutor due to visit our school was also on maternity leave, thus the resulting gap in knowledge across most of the staff. We are now fortunate to have the aforementioned writing tutor as a permanent member of our teaching staff!

I was a late entrant to the project after being approached by my Head Teacher and asked if I would be willing to take part. I accepted the opportunity to be involved as I felt it would be very useful to improve my own teaching and I could hopefully share my experiences with my colleagues. Writing was also earmarked for our development plan the following session and this project would hopefully provide a focus on which we could build.

### Hillpark Secondary

Hillpark is a secondary with a role of 1200. I am an English teacher and have been involved in the New Horizons project with Glasgow Council since 2000 and initially piloted the methodologies with a member of Tinto Primary. Although this member of staff subsequently left Glasgow, I have been involved in the development and evaluation of New Horizons since then.

New Horizons in Writing was introduced to Glasgow schools in 2002 and my department used a number of the writing units successfully.

I was mainly interested in Building Bridges for the opportunity to work with Tinto Primary again. I enjoyed my previous liaison with Tinto and found that such collaboration can lead to an interesting exchange of ideas and resources.

The class I piloted the material on was an S2 mixed ability class, with National Test levels ranging from C to E. This class were familiar with New Horizons methodologies and resources, having completed a number of the units in S1.

### Our Starting Point

It was agreed I would work collaboratively with Pauline Scott as we are schools in the same cluster and we felt it would be useful to have continuity in the development of skills. After initial meetings, we both identified a common weakness in note-taking skills. On examination of some of the research tasks undertaken by our pupils, it was evident that a majority of our pupils were plagiarising from texts and, when questioned, had little understanding of what they had written. This was a weakness which permeated into other curricular areas and so became our focus.

### Aims

The aims of our project were for the pupils to produce a piece of informative writing in the form of a leaflet using New Horizons strategies and for us to develop a resource which could be utilised with future classes. In the primary, the methodology was completely new whereas, in contrast, the S2 class were familiar with New Horizons. We wanted to compare their experiences.

### Methodology

We decided from the outset to use parallel methodology. As our background was the gender and New Horizons documents, we both decided to use NH resources which we would adapt to our own context.

Why reinvent the wheel? The NH methodologies we chose included:

- Big picture
- Chunking
- Timed activities
- Group work
- Paired work

- Writing frames
- Peer assessment

We also used newer methodologies associated with note-taking:

- Highlighting
- Tables

## The Development: what we did

### Primary

In the primary school, I chose to begin much further back in the skills development than the secondary as the children were unfamiliar with the methodologies. The sequence of lessons I chose was:

- Identifying purpose and audience
- Skimming and scanning
- Close reading
- Note-taking

From the outset, the class were aware of 'The Big Picture' - to write a leaflet on a Scottish city. Their audience was primary 6 who would use their leaflets as a resource for their 'Scotland' environmental studies topic. The pupils had undertaken a similar task when they studied 'Scotland' earlier in the year. Examination of the resulting leaflets strongly suggested that they were preoccupied with the appearance of their leaflet and not its content which was largely copied straight from another source.

As I had most of the lessons on disk, I used the interactive whiteboard much of the time. This proved to be a huge asset as during times of feedback, the children were able to make changes and add their ideas on the whiteboard.

I had initially planned to make self assessment sheets for the children to complete at the end of each lesson. Unfortunately, this fell by the wayside. As with all primary 7 classes, there is a great demand on their timetable, not to mention the need to complete National tests and I confess, in my list of priorities, I decided it better to teach all the lessons and assess informally rather than spend extra time and not get the leaflets completed. I did, however, ask the children to comment orally on their work and also, after the final task, I asked them to check over the work of their peers.

### Lesson 1 ( see appendix)

Initial discussion had already brought to my attention pupils' ignorance of *purpose* for reading and I chose to focus their attention on *why* they might read something. They kept a diary of everything they had read in the space of a week and noted why they had read it. This, in turn, helped pose the question of why someone might want to read their leaflet and what questions they would want it to answer. The children were given a *group activity* where they were to discuss the possible content of their leaflet and draw up a list of questions they would like their leaflet to answer. I was very conscious of the noise level during this activity and the open plan nature of the upper school. I know that, personally, I find it very distracting when I am trying to teach over the noise of another class and we all try to have a quiet time in the mornings to allow minimum distraction. The noise really does travel and it's easy to lose your train of thought! It took me a while to become more tolerant of the noise even though I was aware that most children were all on task and group discussions were fruitful.

### Lesson2 - Skimming/scanning/close reading.

Skimming, scanning and close reading took place over the course of 3 lessons, addressing one area each time. Lessons were '*chunked*' into short activities, which helped less able children or those with a shorter attention span, and it was rare that an activity went unfinished. The class were very receptive throughout and it was rare for a pupil to 'opt out' as I have experienced in the past when it all becomes too much. Instead, shorter activities meant that there was a general sense of satisfaction as each was completed and we reported back on what we had achieved. Because a *time limit* was set in order for each activity to be completed, the pupils were less inclined to lose focus although there were one or two pupils who had to be encouraged to keep on task.

When attempting *paired work*, I discovered I needed to think carefully about pairings. A dominant child was prone to take over and, likewise, mixed ability pairing could result in the less able child taking a back seat. I also discovered if I matched the ability level of two pupils who both tended to struggle they produced few results. Depending on the task, I chose partners carefully to try to maximise input from both children. I found, in general, less able children benefited from working with a more able child but not necessarily a 'high flyer' who was more intolerant and didn't want some one holding them back. Careful pairings and timed activities went some way towards addressing this although there was a couple of children who expressed a preference to work on their own.

Most of the children were enthusiastic about paired work and, indeed, many voiced a desire to work in pairs during lessons in other curricular areas.

### Lesson 3 - Paraphrasing

Following our skimming/scanning/close reading lessons, we had an excellent discussion on the merits of using our own words and how very wrong it is to pass off some one else's work as our own. Pupils commented on how disgruntled they felt if a classmate copied their work in school and subsequently received praise for doing it well. This discussion really focussed the children on the lesson's task. As I predicted, they found the task very difficult as they had poor note-taking skills. This made the children aware of the need to gain these skills which led well into the next lesson.

### Lesson 4 - Using Frameworks

Until now, the materials I had been using had been resources already in Hillpark which I had borrowed and adapted to our own context. The methodology for note-taking was new to both primary and secondary. Several children commented how good this was as they tackled the activities. I expanded the original lesson by removing the original passage and getting pairs to expand their notes into a paragraph in their own words. The oral feedback from the children was great. Enthusiasm was fired by the fact that the pupils were now so aware of the need to note take and paraphrase and were now actively averse to coping out large chunks. Comments were overheard during environmental studies from children that they were using their newly found skills to research their topic work and one even wrote a comment in his homework jotter that he had used frameworks to note take when researching homework. It was great that there was a cross curricular impact as hoped.

### Lesson 5 - Highlighting

We moved forward to tackle an alternative method of note-taking using a highlighter pen to highlight main ideas and key words. A few preferred this approach. Many just liked the novelty of using a brightly coloured pen but confessed they found using frameworks an easier, clearer approach. In retrospect, I think this was in part due to the fact that I spent more time teaching frameworks. My enthusiasm was waning by the time I reached this point and this was reflected in the quality of my teaching. ( And, if I was getting bored, no doubt, so too were the class!) Also, when teaching frameworks, we did class activities prior to working in pairs whereas this time, I immediately set a paired task which the children consequently found more challenging.

### Writing the leaflet

When the time came to write the leaflets, I prepared a set of laminates for each major city from which the class could take notes. The class found these very useful as they could use dry-wipe markers to highlight and the laminates could then be cleaned and re used. The class enjoyed the novelty aspect of this and it negated the prospect of having to trawl through potentially useless reference books looking for relevant information.

This series of lessons took up an entire term although the actual leaflets were written in the final week. In comparison to the same task set to the class the previous term without all the prior lessons, the content, layout and structure had, in all cases, improved immensely with all children demonstrating an ability to write a leaflet using the skills taught, although the first leaflets were coloured in much better! (See appendix)

### Secondary

As I have already stated, I chose to work with an S2 class familiar with New Horizons. They were aware of purpose, audience, skimming and scanning, but were also a class whose Countries Projects showed poor note taking skills. As a result I chose to focus on:

- Note-taking
- Writing a leaflet

My class were also made aware of 'The Big Picture', to write an information leaflet on a country and were also made aware of their audience, S1 lower ability pupils, who could use these as resources for research. They responded well to the idea that these leaflets would be used again and that their responses would form part of my report. I felt this was important, as they were working on countries again, albeit with different resources and to produce a different outcome. I was interested in how their previous experiences with New Horizons would affect their interest levels and how would knowledge they would recall.

I used Powerpoints and laminated information sheets on China and Australia, which the pupils could highlight using white board markers. This proved to be highly successful in motivating pupils.

I taught the lessons over a 3-4 week period.

## Lessons

Lessons began with establishing 'The Big Picture' - the aims of the unit and the outcome. Although initially reluctant to work on countries again, they were curious about the laminated sheets I showed them and excited that they were to be part of a national project.

The first task was to remind them of the skimming and scanning techniques they had learned in S1. This was necessary as my references to these techniques were met by blank stares. However, a couple of exercises in *pairs* reminded the class of how these could be used.

In *group conferences*, we also examined their S1 Countries Projects, focusing on any areas which could be improved. Most groups identified that the projects contained too much plagiarism, so were then more motivated to study note-taking skills.

It should be noted here that having used New Horizons in the past, the transition between individual, paired and group work was much smoother. Pupils knew the acceptable noise levels and were familiar with working in times activities and with moving through several activities in a lesson. I find that *timed activities* focuses pupils and *chunking* activities motivates them.

It was only when we moved on to the next section of the work, note-taking skills, that my pupils were to move into unfamiliar territory. The note-taking skills Wendy and I taught were adapted from new guidelines being produced by Margaret Orr. There were several methodologies which could be used to take notes - mainly using frameworks and highlighting. I combined these.

The pupils worked in pairs, then individually, on various passages, which they took notes from using frameworks. They agreed how many sub-headings were necessary for a leaflet and used these to form their framework. When they felt comfortable with these, we moved on to highlighting.

Initially, they highlighted photocopied passages using highlighters and felt pens. Obviously, this could only be a short term method of highlighting due to photocopying budgets. Wendy and I had both agreed that we would use laminated information sheets. I had produced 12 sheets on each country, China and Australia. The class were each given a

white board marker and we discussed how to highlight key words and phrases, then transfer these into the framework. The tables used in the introductory booklet were too limiting, so pupils took sheets of A4 paper and put their sub-headings at the top. They could then transfer highlighted notes directly onto these *using their own words*.

It's interesting that Wendy's class found the frameworks a more effective method, as my class definitely preferred the highlighting. Perhaps this was more of a novelty in a secondary, but it worked remarkably well. The brighter pupils enjoyed it because it was a little different. The less able pupils enjoyed it because it seemed easier than reading a book and they felt they were writing less. In fact, this wasn't the case. I was pleasantly surprised to find that 2 of my less able, more disruptive boys had produced extensive notes, much of it in their own words.

At the end of the note-taking unit we discussed their preferences and how effective they found these methods. Most pupils seemed to agree that the combination of highlighting and frameworks produced the best results and many remarked that this was an easier method of assembling notes than using books. On the positive side, it was also a much quicker method than using books. On the negative side, it did limit more able pupils and only provided enough material for them to produce a leaflet, rather than a report or project.

We then moved on to lessons on writing a leaflet. Although Wendy's class spend more time introducing the unit, we probably spent more time on this aspect. My class were not familiar with the layouts of leaflets, but as writing a leaflet was to be part of their National Tests the next month, I was keen that they became so.

I adapted a New Horizons resource on the layouts of leaflets and also used powerpoints and the interactive whiteboard to demonstrate different approaches to presenting information.

The class then produced leaflets on China or Australia. They obviously couldn't use all their notes, so had to summarise what they had, which again ensured more of the work was in their own words. Some pupils did, of course, become carried away with the colouring and then rushed the actual information, but most made a good attempt and I was especially pleased with the work produced by the level C pupils in the class.

## Impact and the Way Forward

We both noted that note-taking skills were greatly improved, as were the skills necessary for writing to inform. There is an obvious impact for these lessons for English, where pupils are National Tested in functional writing. The Bullying leaflet was used in Hillpark as a National Test and the layout and language to be used were more familiar for pupils, even if the content still had to be written.

There is also an impact across the curriculum if these skills can be transferred to other subject areas.

The children in the primary became aware, many for the first time, of the importance of paraphrasing and after teaching the note-taking skills they were observed using these skills in other curricular areas, I already mentioned.

### Primary

In the primary, I am on the language core group. We are now currently developing our new writing policy into which we are incorporating New Horizons methodologies which will affect the teaching of writing throughout the school.

Personally, I would like to continue using the methodologies but move forward by incorporating formative assessment strategies into my lessons.

### Secondary

In secondary, I shared my results with my department. I emphasised that the note-taking methods would probably be most effective with a lower ability group of pupils, those who would struggle to read a number of books or produce a whole project. For my class the methods were fairly familiar, so I didn't see such a big impact as Wendy probably did, but the class were motivated and the feedback indicated that they enjoyed the highlighting and producing a smaller piece of work than usual. My department were also interested in the obvious connection to the National Tests.

The next stage for me, as with Wendy, would be to pilot the formative assessment strategies which our colleagues were developing. I will also continue to use the frameworks and highlighting in future lessons.

