At the start of the 2009/10 academic year, Sedgefield Community College began a process of looking at how we could make major changes to the way in which learning took place in our school. We were concerned that our students were learning less than they could and that they were too reliant on teachers ‘spoon feeding’ them information and that they didn’t have the skills to be able to think for themselves.

With this in mind, members of the school’s senior leadership team began a process of looking at what was taking place in other schools in the region (and beyond) which had impressive reputations based on their academic achievements and the linked quality of learning that was taking place. Although we saw a lot of excellent practice, it was the thinking ethos that we saw at the St Robert of Newminster School in Washington that was most impressive. At the time, St Robert of Newminster School was the only secondary school in the region accredited as a Thinking School by the CEDU (Cognitive Education Development Unit) at The University of Exeter. We watched students in lessons who had the tools to be able to think deeply and for themselves. We knew that we had discovered the way in which we wanted to develop thinking and learning at Sedgefield Community College.

Richard Cummins, from Kestrel Education, was good enough to visit our school and discussed with us details of the support that would be available to help us in our vision of making a dramatic shift in the way in which our students learn. We received our training in the use of David Hyerle’s Thinking Maps in September 2010 and the first of the thinking tools that we wanted to equip our students with had been introduced. Over the course of the next four months, our students were introduced to the eight maps, one at a time, as we made sure that we all had a full understanding of how each map could support the underlying thought process before moving to the next one.

Although Thinking Maps were a tool that we saw as being vital to help create the thinking ethos we desired, it was just one of a range of approaches that we felt we needed to introduce. As a way of linking all of these approaches together we began to talk about ‘The Sedgefield Learning Box’. For students, this is a metaphorical box that contains tools and strategies that can help them to think more effectively for themselves. For teachers, ‘The Sedgefield Learning Box’ has become a mindset, ensuring we always think deeply about our practice and how our actions impact on the thinking of students.

In addition to the eight Thinking Maps, other tools that we decided to include in our ‘Learning Box’ included Edward De Bono’s Thinking Hats, Art Costa’s Habits of Mind and the Three Storey Intellect. Since 2010, we have gradually introduced and then embedded each of these approaches. Today, we continue to look at how our practice can be refined further to help us with the continuing aim of becoming a thinking school in every possible sense of the word.
When we first investigated what it meant to be an accredited Thinking School, it was always our intention to achieve accreditation through the CEDU. Our desire to achieve this recognition was in order to demonstrate the importance that we attach to the development of a thinking ethos and also to celebrate the achievements of our students and staff in doing so. In June 2012, we were delighted to be successful in achieving the Thinking School award. For us as a school, the award wasn’t seen as the final destination, but more as a ‘staging post’ as we strive to create the best school for our students that we possibly can. Indeed, the accreditation process was an extremely rewarding one and helped us to identify our next steps of development.

Since achieving accreditation in June 2012, we have continued to more fully develop our practice as a Thinking School. We have reflected deeply on the thinking tools that we employ, supplementing these with further approaches where these have been beneficial to learning. Additionally, we have looked at how we develop these approaches further, exploring how we can synthesise the different thinking tools together, linking hats, habits and maps where it is helpful to do so.

As of September 2014, we have now turned our attention towards achieving Advanced Thinking School Accreditation. Once again though, this award would not mark the end of our development as a Thinking School, but would be a way of refreshing the vision that we have to make thinking central to the way our school operates once again.

Throughout the journey that we have undertaken to develop a thinking ethos across our school, we have recognised the need to share practice and appreciated the support that other schools offered us, particularly in our early steps. With this in mind, we are always very happy to speak to other schools who have either already taken action to develop an ethos as a Thinking School, or who are about to embark on this process. To support this process, we created a ‘Learning Box Website’ at http://scclearningbox.weebly.com/ and we are always delighted to speak with colleagues from other schools through this. Indeed, we are proud of the fact that there are a number of schools in our region and beyond who have visited Sedgefield Community College to find out more about what it means to become a Thinking School.

A school is about so much more than results in examinations, but for those who do look at these as an indicator of performance, the introduction of the new approach to learning has corresponded with a dramatic increase in academic achievement. Our students and staff do think more deeply and effectively now than in the past and we know that in the future, we can progress even further.

Paul Fleming

Assistant Headteacher

September 2014