



# **THE PARADIGM SHIFT**



**BERNARD JONES**

## **Ask not what you can do for vocational teaching; ask what vocational teaching can do for you**

**Oi you! Yes, you! Stop right there!** You, who laugh at the ‘**N**ot **V**ery **Q**ualified or ‘**G**oing **N**owhere **V**ery **Q**uickly’ jokes, don’t turn the page and move on just because you saw the dreaded word vocational. Stay with me for a while and we’ll examine how teaching vocational education is not only rewarding in itself, but offers excellent opportunities to:

- Reflect upon and improve your professional practice
- Develop a teaching and learning template with which to raise achievement across the curriculum
- Address gendered inequalities in educational achievement

### **Every Child matters?**

*‘If there is one thing worse than being an ugly duckling in a house of swans, it’s having the swans pretend there’s no difference.’*

**T.Booth**

Firstly, whilst I’m sure that we’d all agree that all ‘children matter’, I’d like to question the idea that all the subjects delivered to the children ‘matter’ equally. Would anyone (honestly please!) deny that the appearance of certain subjects on their timetable elicits a higher ‘oh no’ factor than others? Or that, for a non-specialist teacher of vocational subjects (of whom there are many), the appearance of two hours KS4 or KS5 Health and Social Care on their timetable, is about as welcome as a ‘challenging’ (don’t you just love euphemisms?) Year 9 form class? But, why should this be?

### **I’ve a profession to make?**

In a class based society such as the UK I can understand why ‘the professions’ and the various qualifications and extremely selective educational establishments (Oxbridge et al) that invariably lead students into ‘the professions’ are lauded. However, why are some teachers often involved in propagating the same old line (not in mission statements obviously) that ‘the professions’ are the acme of educational/social achievement, and a ‘successful’ school/education system is one which churns out large numbers of students with the requisite qualifications to enter this extremely small tranche of the real world. Every child matters remember.

Moreover, the last time I checked with colleagues, I gained the distinct impression that teaching was a vocation. So, what’s the problem with teachers consistently delivering vocational education to the same standard, or with the same enthusiasm, as Physics, Mathematics or Politics?

Notwithstanding the current legitimacy issues facing the professions, after the bankers (in cahoots with sections of the legal and accountancy world) seemingly stole all our money and set fire to it, I feel the need to ask, would society benefit more from an education system focused on achieving a growth in

the number of solicitors, bankers, politicians and accountants? Or an education system seeking the production of well trained teachers, nurses and health and social care workers? Answers on a postcard please.

Whilst we, as teachers, can (or indeed should) do very little regarding our students' (and/or their parents') professional career aspirations, we can address issues regarding the parity of esteem between subjects in schools and raise awareness of the Higher Education/career opportunities available to vocational students. After all if we don't deliver vocational education with the same enthusiasm as 'more prestigious' subjects we are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

### Deeds not Words ...

So, with that off my chest, how does the Health and Social Care Department at St Angela's and St Bonaventure's Sixth Form Centre avoid accusations that we 'talk the talk,' but don't 'walk the walk?'

The Health and Social Care Department has been radically transformed over the past five years, moving from a position of being the subject of last resort for students and teachers alike, to becoming – and equally importantly, being widely perceived as – a popular and highly successful academic discipline.



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Departmental success over the past five years is evident in a number of key areas:

- Student numbers have increased from a combined Year 12/13 cohort of seven (all female) students in 2003 studying the AVCE Health and Social Care (Double Award) to around **ninety** students studying the Applied A Level Health and Social Care (Double Award) with approximately 25% of male students in the current cohort
- Student **retention** from Year 12 to Year 13 is now **95-100%** with a **100%** retention rate in Year 13
- Student results are **consistently excellent** with **57%** of the 2008 cohort scoring **AA- BB** and **84%** scoring **AA-CC** (see tables below)

<b>2007/8 A2 Results (Double Award)</b>				
<b>St Angela's Ursuline School</b>				
AA	AA-AB	AA-BB	AA-CC	AA-DD
16%	38%	57%	84%	100%
<b>National Average</b>				
AA	AA-AB	AA-BB	AA-CC	AA-DD
3%	9%	17%	46%	75%

<b>2007/8 AS Results (Double Award)</b>			
<b>St Angela's Ursuline School</b>			
AA	AA-BB	AA-CC	AA-EE
5%	23%	65%	98%
<b>National Average</b>			
AA	AA-BB	AA-CC	AA-EE
3%	15%	40%	87%

- All students show improvement on their ALIS minimum target grades leading to a departmental residual of **1.25** placing the department at **Level I** in the **ALPs National Benchmarks**, which is the highest level.

2008 ALPS Residual	2007 ALPS Residual	2006 ALPS Residual
All	All	All
1.25	1.17	1.25

- Within the **Subject Value Added** assessment of the **Fischer Family Trust** data, the department scored fantastic results, recording an A-C Positive Value Added score of **49%** in relation to **students' prior attainment**, and a Value Added Score of **47%** in relation to the **Socio-Economic background** of the students. These results were the highest in the 6th Form centre and among the highest in the country
- The department has successfully addressed the **underachievement of the boys** studying Health and Social Care and they achieved a 100% pass rate at As and A2 in 2008 and scored a higher ALPs residual than the girls
- Two students, one at AS and one at A2, were ranked in the top 10 students in the country in 2008
- All** students progressed on to **Higher Education** at the *university of their choice* for the second successive year, and this is now the default position for our Health and Social Care 'vocational' students
- The department is recognised as a feeder school for the prestigious City University Nursing Degree programme



## It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it?

So, what is the 'X-factor' that has transformed the department in such a relatively short space of time? If only life were that simple.

The success of the department, as is the success of the wider school across the key stages, is founded in the consistent application of policies aimed at providing the best academic/pastoral environment in which individuals can achieve their potential; accompanied by a continual process of evaluation and review of these policies and careful monitoring of student progression.

However, the establishment of a dedicated and stable specialist teaching team within the department has provided the bedrock for implementing the systems needed to move the department forward. The success of the department has seen a positive shift in its staffing, previously consisting of staff who have been 'press ganged' into teaching the subject, the department now boasts three specialist Social Science teachers and a specialist Science teacher, thus making the job of Head of Department enviably easy.

The policies utilised in the department vary slightly from other departments in the 6th form inasmuch as they reflect the lower level of academic achievement of Health and Social Care students upon entry. Furthermore, departmental policies aim to employ the department's Social Science expertise in the construction of effective systems for the delivery of learning, as evidenced in the department's use of the theories of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to address individual/group attitudes underpinning patterns of student underachievement- more details on this later.

So, the staff are lovely and we've got this wonderful set of policies (more of which later), but have we forgotten anyone? Mmm... Oh, the students.



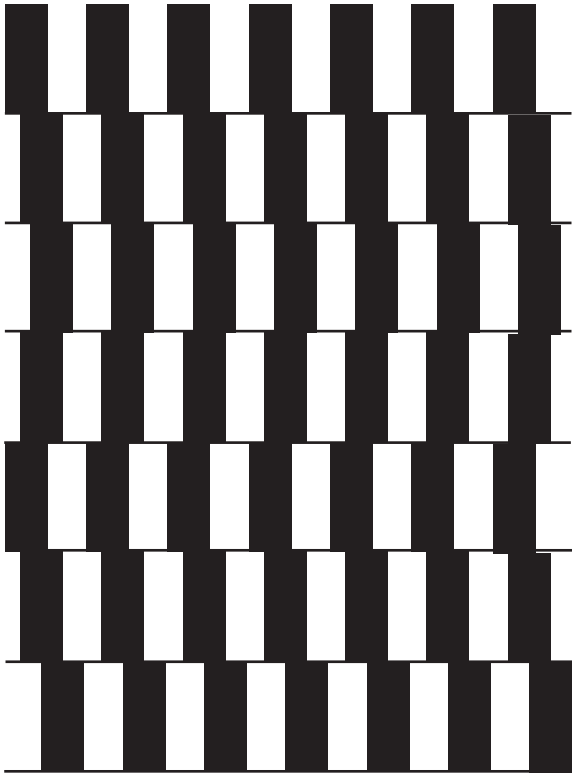
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## By teaching we learn?

*'We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking that we used when we created them'*

**Albert Einstein**

**Are the horizontal lines parallel or do they slope?**



Look at this chart and say the COLOUR, not the word

**YELLOW BLUE ORANGE**

**BLACK RED GREEN**

**PURPLE YELLOW RED**

**ORANGE GREEN BLACK**

**BLUE RED PURPLE**

**GREEN BLUE ORANGE**

An occasional refrain I have heard from staff delivering vocational education is that their results would improve *if only the students were cleverer/worked harder/turned up* etc. Well, if your students can't/won't learn, thank a teacher!

As the images above demonstrate, first impressions count and can shape our response to situations. This is an important point to consider when we are dealing with a new cohort of students.

Adopting a negative approach to the students at the outset, combined with an adherence to the teaching/learning styles that have served them so poorly already, will only lead to a continuation of the cycle of relative underachievement that many vocational students are in. If we continue doing the same things, then surely it is lunacy to expect different results?

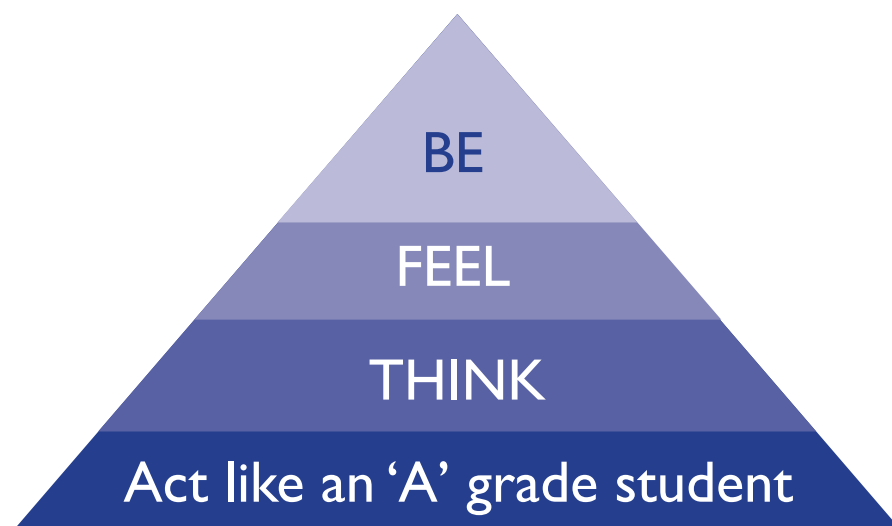
In many respects, realising that our approach to students is often governed by our pre-conceptions (as in the images above) is a step in the right direction and as a department we believe that it is only by *both staff and students* completely severing the link between the students' past achievements and their actual abilities that the opportunity for students to reach their true potential is realised. However, the dogged attachment to the past, and especially patterns of previous academic achievement, by both groups are not easily overcome.

As any fule nos, student achievement is more closely linked to socio-economic background than any other single factor (see *Breaking the Link DCSF 2009*). Therefore, putting the blame on the student for underachievement (I know there are exceptions, but we're talking about students who have reached KS5 here) is about as useful as berating a student for their lack of height.

As a department we aim to address the individual, social and psychological issues that hinder student achievement and have adopted the approach of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy as a framework for addressing the student's lack of belief in their ability, which often undermines their attempts to progress.

The basic premise of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (with apologies to psychotherapists everywhere for this gross simplification), is that, *if you think you can, or you think you can't, you're probably right*. Or, for those of a more classical bent, as Virgil argued, 'they are able because they think that they are are able.'

Underpinning this approach is the framework (below), which is ubiquitous in Health and Social Care classrooms.



Using this framework turns the student 'self esteem' issue on its head, positing that self esteem is *earned* not *given* i.e. that self esteem derives from internal factors based on personal achievements – first *acting* like an A grade student – not just external factors such as encouragement. We focus on raising the student's awareness of the situation regarding their previous academic achievements, and instilling the realisation that, *if they change what they do, what subsequently happens will also change.*

A shift in focus to a belief that achievement leads to increased self esteem, which subsequently leads to further achievement, enables a break to be made with the previous cycle of student underperformance. The development of this pattern of thinking eventually ensures the transfer of responsibility (and reward) for learning from the teacher to the student. But how do we achieve this?

Firstly, we adopt a realistic approach to our students' abilities, being acutely aware that the stropy, work shy Year 11 student who left school in June has not been miraculously transformed into a fully fledged independent Further Education student after being sprinkled with magic student dust in the summer break.

The students who qualify to study Health and Social Care have an average GCSE grade of a D and invariably do not achieve 5 A-Cs including English and Mathematics. I would contend that, within schools as organised and focused on all students achieving 5 A-Cs (including English and Maths) as St Angela's/ St Bonaventure's, the students represented in this relatively underachieving cohort have expended more time and energy avoiding the work required to gain 5 A-Cs than they would have by actually doing it. Against this background we only really have one choice; *give them more work to do from day one than they've ever had before.*



## Waving or Drowning?

Confronting a work shy student with enormous amounts of work at the inset stage of their KS5 learning may seem to be a way of setting them up to fail and lowering your cohort numbers. However, as our retention statistics demonstrate, this isn't the case. Why? You may well ask.

This is the part of our course where work (ours and the students) is very much front end loaded and the teaching/ learning really begins. At this early stage, even though this is KS5, we adopt an approach more closely linked with KS3, using the Vygotskian teaching methods (remember your PGCE?) of modelling and scaffolding to enable students to gradually improve their work and reach their potential.

Initially the students are continually set essays in order to improve their literacy skills and build their knowledge base.

By and large the essays are pretty awful, so the staff sit and mark them (again and again if necessary,) with the diligence of an English Department NQT who fancies the Head of Department's job. This is a very painful process. But it works: Literacy improves and students gain good grades which raises their self esteem.

All students, with the high level of support offered, will achieve an A or B grade essay in the first month of study and this is where *their* work really begins and the transition to independent learning is started. The grades the students achieve at this stage are used as their baseline grade and the students are issued with an individual chart upon which they are required to record all their subject grades for coursework and homework (see below).

<b>STUDENT:</b>														
<b>Minimum Target Grade:</b>														
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
<b>A*</b>														
<b>A</b>														
<b>B</b>														
<b>C</b>														

We have found that ignoring the students' official ALISTMGs (you try telling a keen student and their even keener parent/s that their target grade is an E or even a U!), and providing realistic aspirational targets, is an effective means of encouragement and, coupled with the students receiving comprehensive staff support, provides the basis for shifting individual perception of realistic future achievement.

The support provided for students is extensive. The department operates an 'open door' policy for students (forget about lunch – do the Health and Social Care diet!) and all students have the Hod's mobile 'phone number (crank/prank calls in 5 years? None), and all staff's e-mail addresses, offering the *potential* for 24-7 support.

This may seem generous on the behalf of the staff, but in reality it is shifting the focus of learning back on to the students. If you haven't done / don't understand your work you have no excuses; and the message that this is a department with a 'no excuse' culture rapidly filters through to the students. Moreover, the standard issuing of e-mails and telephone numbers is a very good method of raising the levels of parental involvement and many parents will regularly call the HoD directly to enquire about achievement and attendance etc.

Secondly, the students are provided with excellent ICT resources. All students have access to electronic resources via the Learning Platform and are issued with (well, pressurised into buying if we're being honest ), a CD containing all the resources (ppts, worksheets, exam papers and mark schemes, course specifications etc), that they will need for both AS and A2. Generous? Or another way of ensuring students are responsible for their learning? The CD, and the ability to easily contact staff, chips away at the 'my dog ate my homework' culture of some students. Had a day off? Missed some lessons? We did lessons 3, 4 and 5 in Unit 6 with the following worksheets-they're all on your CD!

## University Challenge?

*'Ideals are like the stars: we never reach them,  
but like the mariners of the sea,  
we chart our course by them.'*

**Carl Schurz**



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If the 'Big Picture' is required for an effective lesson, then surely it is required even more to help the students plot their path through F.E. and on to H.E? Students will not suddenly buy into a culture of hard work, to achieve a lasting shift in their attitudes we need to have a carrot to dangle and incentivise them.

To help establish the 'Big Picture,' and the carrot, the department ensures that all students attend an open day at a university within weeks of starting the course and regularly attend further careers fairs and open days. We are aided in this process by the universities (such as Kings and City) we have developed close links with, who provide seminars and lectures for our students outlining the many H.E. options available to them. Also the students are introduced to people working in the health/social care sector who can answer the most important question for students: how much will I earn?

To embed the notion that the new cohort are potential A grade students, who are definitely going to university, we encourage close mentoring of Year 12 students by the most successful Year 13 students and also arrange for Year 13 students to deliver **unsupervised induction talks** to Year 12s; engendering an atmosphere where frank student to student discussions can happen and useful tips passed on.

This process is very popular with the students. After all, if we told the new cohort that we had the best department in the school they may choose to believe us or not – would you trust a parent’s judgement on how beautiful and talented their children are? However, if our Year 13 students convey this information to the new cohort, they find this rather more convincing.

To further stimulate students’ engagement with the subject, the department actively pursues opportunities for student engagement in local schools and our own school community at the earliest opportunity. Students are involved in delivering literacy lessons to KS1 students, teaching GCSE Health and Social Care students at local schools, organising seminars for other Sixth Form Centres and working alongside staff in our own schools Learning Support Departments. The ability to translate the more practical aspects of the course into real life situations aids the learning process and has certainly inspired many students to pursue a career in teaching or social work (yes, I did warn ‘em.)



*If we want to caption this photo it will go here*



## All Carrot, No Stick?

*'Seeing much, suffering much,  
and studying much, are the  
three pillars of learning.'*

**Benjamin Disraeli**

The third area where the department promotes individualised learning is the bi-partisan approach to intervention/support strategies. In addition to Parents' Evenings and the standard report cycle, students participate in a formal academic review with all members of staff twice yearly following the Summer/Winter examination sessions.

During this review (parents are invited but attendance is not compulsory), the students discuss their progress together with staff. After discussions, underachieving students are placed on a study contract, which they help to construct (although not entirely equally), and which they and their parents sign.

The key point of these formalised meetings is to provide a close *individualised* package of support and intervention. At this stage students quickly realise that, whilst we may talk softly as a department, we also carry a big stick (if OFSTED are reading this, the stick is a METAPHOR.)

Students who are underachieving are placed on short term compulsory study contracts stating that they must attend the Sixth Form Study Centre for all their 'free' periods and (if necessary) on Saturday mornings for three hours until they have reached targets mutually agreed by staff, students and students' parents/carers.

Our early intervention strategies ensure that students do not fall behind to the extent that they are ever in danger of failing the course, and, as the students have constructed and signed their own study contract, they are placed in a situation where they can see that by not working they are only really letting themselves down. Guilt (as Catholics know only too well!) can be more powerful than fear as a coercive tool.

More importantly, extremely close supervision of underperforming students at this often challenging and decisive stage of their studies has helped address the gendered inequalities in achievements. As a department we have found that shifting the focus of responsibility for learning on to the students is gender neutral and that, with adequate support, boys respond just as well as girls to learning opportunities delivered within a personalised and supportive framework.

## Who Dares wins?

*'I never blame failure – there are too many complicated situations in life – but I am absolutely merciless towards lack of effort.'*

**F. Scott Fitzgerald**

For many students, underachievement is linked to fear of failure. For our department, challenging this fear is a primary concern and the strategies outlined above combine to engender a 'can do' approach to learning for our students. But this process will only ever be successful with underachieving students if the students are in an environment where support, both emotional and academic, are consistently available. This involves a great deal of hard work and dedication from the staff; but the rewards are superb (not fiscally obviously!)

Being part of the process that helps transform a struggling, doubt ridden, 'below average' student into an independent student capable of envisaging Higher Education and then going to university is a joy. However, we believe that our departmental approach is a useful template for all teachers dealing with underperforming students across the curriculum; or is it for all students dealing with underperforming teachers across the curriculum?

After all, if we all *acted* like A grade teachers, then *thought* like A grade teachers, then *felt* like...



