Developing Independent Learners

What Happened?
I went to a conference in July 1999 during the holidays. You can picture it, after half a year teaching at a new school having moved with 3 young children and trying to settle them into a new community, I drove the 5 hours to Adelaide on the Monday ready for the conference and yes – I woke up with a cold. The conference was for 2 days and I told myself that if it was no good, I wouldn’t go back the second day. It was called “Inclusive Teaching” and changed everything about the way I viewed the teaching process. Needless to say, I did go back to the second day.

Presenters were generally classroom practitioners who had experimented with a variety of methodologies to better meet the needs of their clientele. This included students requiring challenges as well as those with literacy issues requiring structures to assist them in writing tasks.

Having originally completed a degree with a major in Home Economics; methodologies such as Blooms Taxonomy as a teaching tool immediately appealed to me. I used them quite a lot on my return in Terms 3 and 4 in Home Economics classes.

2000 came around and I won the job to teach Society and Environment within the middle school - the subject area I had completed my other study in. Having no materials to guide me on what the students had previously covered, I asked a couple of what I labelled ‘conscientious’ students if I could look at their books from the previous year. Each time I received the same puzzled expression and response ‘Oh, I’ve thrown them away’. I was horrified, all this time spent note taking only for it to be binned within 8 weeks of schools finish!

My significant change slowly began to take direction. No longer was taking notes, questions and answers any good. If students had no need for the work so soon after, then something had to change. My policy became that of providing them with the ‘structure’ – tools they would use to assist their learning. This included using concept maps and working with proformas to assist with tasks such: planning, note taking, bibliographies, researching and report writing. It also included finding out more about the key competencies, thinking styles and methods of developing thinking skills.

In the next couple of years through SACSA workshops, the schools’ involvement in the Middle Schooling Network and my knack of teaching something new each year (my repertoire now includes Home Economics from Year 2 to 10, Geography, History, S and E from Year 7 to 10, Legal Studies, Australian Studies, Early Childhood Studies, Food and Hospitality, Nutrition and Lifestyle, Science to Year 9, middle school English and Health), I remodelled my ‘teaching’ and have become more ‘a part of the team’.

Why do you think this is a significant change?
It is a significant change as I came out teaching as I had been taught and it was rather insignificant. I now do teach some things such as how to write a procedure, sentence or report. New concepts such as analysing a poem, factors affecting and environment, the levels of government – obviously at times need some specific teaching. My focus has become on the skills required to find it out, present it, plan and organise, problem solve, think etc.

**How do you know that this has made a difference?**
I probably only realised this in July 2005. (Yes – it may have been significant but it has taken 6 years). Two things happened – Firstly I managed to get myself lost in the Gammon Ranges in the holidays and whilst trying to sleep by a fire baking on one side and freezing on the other I thought of all the things I would miss if I were never found. One of them was marking the work completed by my 7/8 home-class! I used to hate marking! Now they have these skills and negotiate a lot of tasks themselves, I love marking and finding out what they have achieved. Secondly, I picked up a new student in Term 3 and I realised how independent my students had become. Although it hadn’t always appeared that way, in comparison to a new student who had come from a very different educational experience, I could see quite a difference in the processes my students had available to use in tackling new tasks and experiences.