



Exploring teaching and learning in real and virtual worlds

A SPRinG teacher's perspective

Narration

Jane Brine is head of the science faculty at a secondary education College in the East Midlands. She's been involved with Maurice Galton's part of the SPRinG project since it's inception in the year 2000. We started by asking her about her early involvement in the project.

Jane Brine

My role in developing the project was one of collaboration so we worked with the research team, we developed the materials together, we discussed what would work in the classroom and what we might get out of this, and from the researcher's point of view what they needed to get out of it, so you really felt that you were part of it and that could control which direction it went in, you could report back on what had worked and what hadn't worked, and in that respect you owned it, it was your project, and so if somebody owns something then they're going to be a lot more enthusiastic about it because it is theirs, rather than being asked to do something or given a load of work and said, right, well try this, try this, try this, but we actually produced that work ourselves, collaboratively within our teams.

Liaison with the research team involved going over to Cambridge about once a term, it varied, and we would spend the entire day there with other teachers from different schools across East Anglia and then Maurice would come to Stanground, he would observe lessons and we would discuss issues and how things were going. The end product of our meetings was that during the time we spent in Cambridge we would discuss the actual work that we were doing so we would discuss what we were going to put into the program next, whether it was going to be doing roles, whether it was going to be the type of materials that we were going to use in the classroom, whether it was the feedback that we were looking for and some of the results on the work that we'd done already, so it was a very wide range of things, so in fact it was great fun because talking about teaching's always easier than doing it and it was really, it reinforced what you were doing and it made you feel more enthusiastic and energetic to go back into the classroom.

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So what does Jane see as some of the things that make group work, work?

Jane Brine

I would say that what makes group work effective is that the students are engaged with the task, they're motivated, they have an end point, they know what they have got to produce at the end of it, and they know the steps that they need to take to get there so that they produce something, they know what they're aiming for, if they know what they're aiming for then they can do it. If it's too open and not structured, then they'll flounder and there's nothing worse than giving a student a blank piece of paper and they've no idea what to do.

We have always done CASE, which is Cognitive Acceleration through Science Education thinking skills, and the basis of that involves actually making really good groups so that they will discuss issues. Unless they come up with the discussion, it's not worth doing CASE, so we put all our group work into our CASE lessons so we trained them to actually work cohesively as a group and got stable groups, and then we actually started doing CASE. Then we brought in Learning to Learn through Key Stage 3 because we felt that doing practical work and all sorts of work they really needed to work as groups, and also they learn a lot more and they're more motivated when they're actually working with their peers, they learn a lot from one another, so if you can stop them talking about *Eastenders* and start them talking about science they can learn loads.

So we actually brought it into Year 7 and we trained them on how to actually work in groups through Year 7, and then applied that and revisited that through Years 8 and 9 and, in fact, if you get a group that's quite difficult I still use it with Year 10 and mainly the lower ability groups, but to establish foundations for working in groups at the beginning of the year, and then I actually remind them of it during the year.

Unless the proper group rules are set up at the beginning then you will get a lot of off-task behaviour. You will get students who don't really want to be involved and take it as a free ride, so they'll sit there and let somebody else get on with it, or you'll get two students who'll have a chat while the other two do the work. You'll get someone who will hog all of the work and want to do it all, and not let the other students take part; you'll get some students who won't listen to anything that anybody else says so they're not able to make a contribution; you've got to make sure that they know what the rules are so that everybody in the group can make a contribution and everybody is involved in the work.

My role in group work is to set up the task in such a way that everyone can succeed, and then my role is to circulate around the groups, not telling them what to do, but just making sure that I facilitate their ability to complete the task. The impact that group work has had on the students' motivation and behaviour is that if they know the rules for working in a group they all enjoy group work; they only don't enjoy group work when it goes wrong or they get told off because they haven't actually done what they were supposed to do, so if they know the rules for working in a group, and the task is set up in such a way that they can succeed, it's very, very fulfilling so they enjoy it.

Narration

What does Jane see as other advantages of working in groups?

Jane Brine

The impact on students who have social or behavioural problems is that they learn how to behave within a group and the rest of the group monitor the way they behave, and the rest of the group try to guide them back to where they should be and how they should be behaving. So behaviourally if they're working in groups you have a lot more control because they control one another, so during practical work the behaviour has improved.

Group work also helps relationships with students who find it difficult to get on socially because by allocating them a role, or telling them the possible roles that they could fulfil, it takes away some of the anxiety because they can actually see the point in what they're doing and they can talk about the work and that's a lot less stressful than having to interact socially with other students, so they can contribute, it makes them feel valued and it improves their self worth.

The difficulties that we still have in group work are exactly the same as they always have been, so students will still misbehave, they'll still talk to somebody else about something else, they'll still talk about *Eastenders*, so although this is a way, or a pathway, of actually improving the way they work in groups, nothing's perfect, so it's a work in progress and it always will be, so you start again with the rules and then you build on that, and you just keep on doing it as anyone, anyone who's a teacher or in education or has their own children will know.

Narration

What about the evaluation of the project – how was that done?

Jane Brine

The project was evaluated, both on a personal level so you could write about it qualitatively, but it was also on a quantitative level with pre-tests and post-tests with your groups that were doing group work and also the groups who were a control group as well, and we had different methods of doing group work as well, so within this school there were three different groups who were doing group work, and they would approach slightly different methods, so there was quite a lot of data that we generated so that they could come up with their evaluation.

One way that I would have improved the project was if we could have had some follow-up, say a year later, to see what we had actually done with the SPRinG work that we have done so far, rather than just it stopping totally dead; to have actually had a follow-up where they actually asked us about the impact, the impact on behaviour, the impact on their results at Key Stage 3, that would have been very good.

Narration

What does Jane see as the benefits for her of her long involvement with the SPRinG project?

Jane Brine

My confidence in teaching has really increased because I feel now that so long as I have set up the lesson properly, and the difference with doing a group work lesson and doing an ordinary lesson is the preparation. You have to do more preparation and make sure that the structure is there for the students to succeed and to have enough information and instruction to be able to complete the task, and then during the lesson you actually have very little to do. If you've set it up correctly then the students will actually teach themselves and they will learn as they're doing that.

My recommendations for teachers and researchers working together on projects like this is go for it, it's fantastically rewarding, it's really interesting, it re-motivates you as well as the students because you're doing something different, it inspires you to be more creative, I would definitely do it again.