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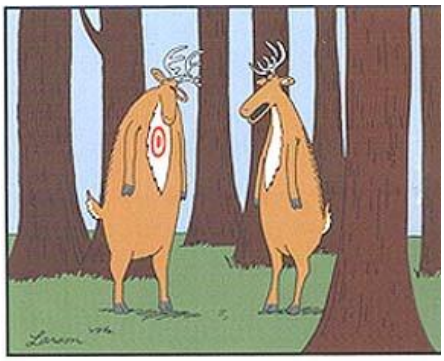
Creating a Culture of Excellence in your school



"Bummer of a birthmark, Hal."

Ian Warwick, Senior Director LGT
ian.warwick@londongt.org

The London Challenge
For world class education

How schools can create a culture of excellence

- Deliberately set up productive failure in your students by continually raising the bar *(Until we make the high level most challenging demands we will never know if our students would have been capable of reaching the highest standards).*
- Teach students about the role that personal responsibility and effort plays in success. *(Too many students think effort is only for the inept, which can lead to 'imposter syndrome', where a child never really believes that they're clever and is way too reliant on externally given accreditation).*
- Talk explicitly about subject mastery *(Try not to gloss over the 'Big Issues and Complex Concepts' so that students genuinely understand what excellence might look like and need to struggle to attain).*

Teach students about the role that effort, ambition and personal responsibility plays in success in English

- *Encourage students to question and challenge their own answers, forcing them to use the text rigorously to support their interpretations and to see that alternative interpretations of texts are to be encouraged and explored.*
- *Show what can be done by getting students to write analytically and evaluatively rather than descriptively and instilling students with a confidence to take risks in examinations / interviews.*
- *A* responses require a personal enthusiastic engagement with ideas and texts so students' ambition can help them avoid the temptation to 'play it safe' rather than display the flair that the examiners are looking for.*

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How schools can create a culture of excellence

10. Rigorously reinforce scholarship *(The whole point of learners as 'experts in development' is that they need to grasp the essentials of a subject but also to understand how difficult and frustrating gaining scholarship can be).*
10. Establish clear expectations regarding accuracy and precision in the use of high level subject specific language *(Make the use of technical language a high priority when evaluating the quality of teaching and learning and make it clear that precision is expected).*
10. Teach to the top through deliberately and explicitly demanding work *(Make explicit what skills and behaviours are required of your learners to achieve beyond the top grades and encourage them to go 'off piste').*

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Establish clear expectations regarding precision in the use of high level subject specific language in English

- *Ruthlessly assess and interrogate meaning and test and probe discourse and consistently challenge students to improve their quality of expression.*
- *Establish a continual feedback loop of writing and improvement – students only achieve at the top end if they are continually engaging with texts through the medium of written, academic argument, and in order to improve they need specific feedback on that writing so that they can implement generic improvements in subsequent arguments (not in corrections to existing pieces).*
- *Develop students' ability to write with a wide-ranging and suitable vocabulary, as well as their ability to reproduce argumentative genres and to achieve stylistic density and precision.*

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How schools can create a culture of excellence

- Define success, high standards and appropriate levels of progress *(What does it look like for the learner, and how do we transmit that awareness? How do we ensure we as teachers know what we're aiming for? What are the indicators of excellence, and who generates them? Explore national vs local standards and peer group influence).*
- Apply and communicate the language of high expectations and aspirations throughout the school *(Normalise academic excellence through the school culture by modelling it and encouraging an intellectual curiosity and bravery that never sets academic learning as beyond anyone's reach and avoid geeks and freaks stereotypes).*
- Celebrate expertise and mastery and normalise intellectual debate *(Don't protect students from grappling with difficult tasks and ensure students are routinely expected to give extended, reasoned answers or are at least given that opportunity).*

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Define success, high standards and appropriate levels of progress in English

- *Develop resources that offer students real stretch on the most challenging texts to support their deconstruction of unseen texts (combined with past AEA exam papers and the use of ELAT papers and Pre U Global Perspectives all accessible online).*
- *Choose challenging texts as they necessitate a depth of thought and set high standards as well as force students to have to confront difficulty and develop understanding the hard way.*
- *Select Paradise Lost rather than Carol Ann Duffy to try to achieve an A* as opposed to very securely achieving an A by tick-boxing all requirements.*

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How schools can create a culture of excellence

10. Offer the opportunity for students to embrace ambiguity, doubt and uncertainty *(Expose students to novel situations that might threaten their security and self esteem and offer them the opportunity to make disparate connections and to apply existing knowledge to new challenges).*

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Offer the opportunity for students to embrace ambiguity, doubt and uncertainty in English

- *Ensure students are exposed to thinking beyond the boundaries and are focused on the most difficult texts.*
- *It is vital to encourage students to question and challenge their answers, and to act like detectives forcing them to use the text rigorously to support their interpretations and to see that alternative interpretations are to be encouraged and explored.*
- *It's important with the new linear A levels to focus on the unseen and to give students practice on practical criticism through the Pre U Cambridge Lit Paper and to give them experience of sensitively interpreting texts in the light of other texts.*

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How teachers can nurture excellence in classrooms

- By talking about learning and studying as a reward in themselves
- By demonstrating your own joy and passion for the subject
- By 'injecting fizz' to raise students' engagement and excitement
- By keeping lessons high in concepts, low in repetition
- By ensuring the students can see the relevance of your subject
- By encouraging risk taking and bravery by taking risks yourself
- By talking about your own learning journey to expertise
- By giving students 'nowhere to hide' and driving the lesson harder
- By offering genuinely exploratory dialogue and discussion

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Identifying Maths A* skills and behaviours at 11?

- Works quickly but may make mistakes in calculation but may also consider the elegance and efficiency of alternative lines of enquiry or procedures.
- Develops individual non standard methods for solving problems, and skimp on explanations but may be able to justify them.
- Sees the implications of concepts quickly, but may complicate problems by thinking of other implications or restrictions.
- Takes unexpected sidelines or develops short cuts, by making connections to different branches of maths and applying them creatively.
- Examines the strategies adopted when investigating within mathematics itself or when using mathematics to analyse tasks.
- Includes mathematical justifications, distinguishing between evidence and proof and explains their solutions to problems involving a number of features or variables.

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Identifying English A* skills and behaviours at 11?

- Asks questions to challenge and develop thought and recognises and accepts ambiguity.
- Shows a perceptive critical faculty which enables connections and judgments to be made within and beyond texts,
- Uses an unusually wide vocabulary, often accurately, experimentally and can often read constantly, voraciously, even indiscriminately.
- Expresses ideas succinctly, sometimes elegantly but may feel detail or support is so obvious as to be unnecessary.
- Identifies main issues in debates and devises strategies quickly to deal with them, in many roles, perhaps in unorthodox ways.
- Understands registers instinctively and can react creatively to others' ideas to mediate and develop them.

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Identifying Science A* skills and behaviours at 11?

- Observes with insight, offering perceptive interpretations and extrapolations.
- Asks novel what if type questions, making links to prior knowledge but with lateral twists.
- Sees relationships between variables and makes perceptive explanations of hypotheses.
- Makes intuitive leaps in different situations, showing genuine curiosity and persistent interest in topics.
- Absorbs new concepts rapidly demonstrating a great interest in the bigger questions such as the nature of the universe.
- Reluctant to accept simplified explanations or to work on anything which is low level and unchallenging.

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What are the barriers to A* in Science?

- students inability to fully understand the requirements of the question, to use their taught knowledge to explain unknown and unfamiliar facts and to form synoptic links between topics.
- students can arrive with low expectations, low motivation and a preconceived idea that Science is difficult but GCSE can also give students the false idea that they can cram science at the last minute and still obtain a high mark.
- students can lack cumulative understanding and as science builds on basic principles this can make more advanced study not only challenging but frustrating.
- students may not have a high enough degree of literacy and may need to be taught all the keywords to extend both their academic and scientific terminology and literacy.

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What would help students in Science?

- enabling students to answer questions in sufficient detail, using the appropriate technical terminology, especially when presented with novel or synoptic questions
- employing preparatory materials in bridging the knowledge gap between GCSE and A level, so that a greater proportion of lesson time becomes dedicated to tackling the more challenging aspects of the topic and stretching the more able students
- sparking the interests of students both within and outside of the classroom in the bigger concepts of science
- clarifying the level of specificity required in student answers, compared to GCSE. They critically need to express ideas with accurate and technical terminology and have misconceptions in language - how the meaning of words changes from KS4 to KS5

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10 issues to consider

Task; *How do we ensure a healthy balance between open and closed questions/answers?*

Resource; *How do we offer additional content that supports genuine higher order thinking?*

Assessment; *How do we provide a range of assessment methods to gain evidence of challenge?*

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10 issues to consider

Pace (sequence); *How do we assess how much practice is required to achieve mastery of content/skills?*

Support; *How do we offer support only when it is needed and how do we judge when it can be self-selected?*

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10 issues to consider

Extension; *How do we offer challenging extension materials without them being seen as just more work?*

Research; *How do we best support the skills of active research and offer alternative sources of information?*

Dialogue; *How do we use classroom questions to encourage exploratory talk and active listening?*

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10 issues to consider

Grouping; *How do we encourage the social skills students need to capitalise on the freedom of group work?*

Self-direction; *How do we decide what conditions are required for students to set their own direction?*

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Unhelpful approaches

- **'Knights in shining armour'** coming to the rescue way before there is any distress expressed
- **'Here's one I prepared earlier'** pre-cooking and pre-digesting resources and delivering knowledge without the difficulty
- **'Negators of challenge'** not trying to defamiliarise materials, over scaffolding and over simplifying
- **'God'** on tap as the expert, who has been there, done that and doesn't explain how they got there or back

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Unhelpful approaches

- **'Apologists'** accepting first sound bite responses too readily, not planning spaces to think and not grilling students
- **'Life support machines'** creating need and not encouraging independence, or planning for student choice
- **'Blue Peter presenters'** over-praising and dispensing badges of approval too readily and with sketchy evidence of merit
- **'Echo chambers'** happily paraphrasing each student's comments for the others who weren't listening and helpfully adding a little too.

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"I expect you all to be independent, innovative, critical thinkers who will do exactly as I say!"

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Set up sticky situations

- *How can we teach students that grappling with challenges is more important than any amount of easy success?*
- Encourage the development of the skill of ‘knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do’ and that learning is learnable.
- Have ongoing speculative learning projects visible in your classroom that anyone can contribute ideas on.

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Utilize real world problems

- *What features of our subject allow students to properly investigate and research?*
- Set up issues and problems that experts in your subject face and deal with.
- Utilize research questions and new technologies often and give the students the role of expert in co-development.

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Stress the big ideas and concepts

- *What is the big idea behind our subject and how can it be offered to students in a form that doesn't short-circuit their own thinking?*
- Focus on what our subject gives to the world and what it is there to explain or offer.
- Take students behind the curtain of your lesson and to see your teaching and learning intentions.

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Present ideas as live

- *How can we best present our subject as still relevant and dynamic?*
- Stress inquiry and the sense of possibility and discovery by not focusing on what is already done, dusted and certain.
- Model genuine curiosity yourself in your reactions to unforeseen events or questions.

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Create interesting hooks

- What ‘trailer type’ activities will assist our students to develop affective engagement?
- Use interesting ‘what if’ questions with meaningful trailers to involve students emotionally and imaginatively to guide them.
- Externalize your own personal thinking and decision-making in a classroom, and learn aloud.

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Take the stabilizers off

- *How can we counteract the tendency of students to want everything spoon-fed and ‘bite sized’ and encourage them to develop their own chewing muscles?*
- Encourage engagement with the unknown and away from steering responses into right answer tunnels.
- Promote exploration, step beyond the horizon and take risks yourself.

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Share what makes you excited

- *What is emotionally engaging about your subject and why is it meaningful?*
- Make it clear that there are moments where we get excited about our subject and that still happens.
- Explain to students what helped us to 'get' our subject, our own learning histories and where our sense of security and expertise comes from.

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Ian Warwick, LGT Founder and Director

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