

ANALYSIS

EVALUATION

CREATIVE
THINKING

SYNTHESIS

THINKING
AND REASONING
SKILLS

PROBLEM
SOLVING

INFORMATION
PROCESSING

CASE STUDY

The College of Richard Collyer

Founded originally in the 16th century, and now with around 1,400 students, The College of Richard Collyer is considered one of the best sixth form colleges in England. The College offers AS and A Level courses in 45 different subjects.

QUALIFICATION: THINKING AND REASONING SKILLS

CUSTOMER: THE COLLEGE OF RICHARD COLLYER

Founded in 1532, The College of Richard Collyer is a sixth form college situated in the town of Horsham, West Sussex. With just over 1,500 students aged 16 to 19, Collyer's, as it is also known, offers a broad range of subjects at A Level from Art and Design to Travel and Tourism, as well as post-19 courses.

In 2009, Collyer's decided to review its Key Skills offering, exploring newer and more appropriate alternatives for its 16–19-year-old students.

"We were aware that Key Skills were being withdrawn and so it gave us the opportunity to look at what we could offer our students instead," explains Steve Nicholls, Vice Principal of Collyer's. *"We spoke with OCR and they were able to provide us with the names of other sixth form colleges who'd also been in this situation."*

"We broadly knew what we were looking for, so when it was recommended that we look at OCR's Thinking and Reasoning Skills qualification, it seemed perfect, especially as we were already delivering Critical Thinking to our students at AS Level and had some experience of what it was about."

FOLLOWING ITS SUCCESSFUL PILOT, IN JANUARY 2011 OCR'S THINKING AND REASONING SKILLS LEVEL 2 QUALIFICATION BECAME AVAILABLE NATIONALLY, HELPING STUDENTS TO DEVELOP THINKING SKILLS ACROSS ALL SUBJECTS, FROM THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES TO SCIENCE.

SUITABLE FOR KEY STAGE 3, KEY STAGE 4 AND SIXTH FORM STUDENTS, THE QUALIFICATION ENCOURAGES PROBLEM SOLVING, THE ABILITY TO QUESTION EVIDENCE, AND STRONGER REASONING SKILLS. IT ALSO LINKS TO OCR'S AS LEVEL CRITICAL THINKING.

ANALYSIS

CREATIVE
THINKING

CONCEPTUAL
THINKING

"We wanted a course that wasn't subject specific; one that would help students to perform with practical skills in reasoning and delivering their arguments," says Steve. *"They know their subject matter learned on other courses and we wanted to help them apply that knowledge in different ways and situations."*

The overall aim was to provide Collyer's students with an even greater chance of securing their choice of university place or a position at work and, more significantly, to help students make the transition between GCSE and Level 3 approaches to studying.

Having decided to take on the qualification, Collyer's wanted to introduce it immediately so there was no break between teaching Key Skills and the introduction of the Thinking and Reasoning Skills course.

"We saw no reason to hang about," says Steve. *"We didn't want to wait a year and then re-introduce a qualification, so we jumped right in and began preparing to teach and marketing the qualification to our new intake of students."*

Historically, Collyer's had always made it clear to incoming students that they could pick their own programme of study; but they would also need to take part in a broad and balanced curriculum suited to their time in the sixth form and designed to prepare them for the next phase of their education.

"With Thinking and Reasoning Skills we simply continued that approach to sixth form education," explains Steve. *"At our June 2010 Welcome Day, when applicants were coming in to find out more about Collyer's, we made it clear that Thinking and Reasoning Skills would be compulsory for a number of this new intake."*

Furthermore, Collyer's had recently been validated as a member of the pilot group for the SFBac (Sixth Form Baccalaureate) sponsored by the Sixth Form Colleges' Forum. The SFBac is a certification framework to highlight the learning experience of students in sixth form colleges encapsulated in the phrase: *"subjects, skills, values, breadth"*.

Out of 800 AS Level students enrolling, 280 were signed up to study Thinking and Reasoning Skills, with 17 classes of around 17 students each. The course would take up one hour per week in each student's timetable, with additional workshops added as and when appropriate for additional topics.

Collyer's had the staffing capacity to deliver the course. A course co-ordinator was appointed and teachers were briefed, their main concern being how much preparation time would be needed to deliver the course.

"We have a culture here that understands that 'education is education', and so the majority of our teaching staff were very happy to get involved," says Steve. *"One or two questioned their involvement, particularly as this is a Level 2 qualification, but most of our teachers could see why it was a good move for the students."*

Delivery of the qualification in its first year at Collyer's was shared among ten staff from a range of subject areas including English, Mathematics, Geography, Modern Languages, Dance and IT.

"We were very pleased with the spread of subject staff and the only faculty not directly involved in the first year was Science", says Steve.

PROBLEM
SOLVING

INFORMATION
PROCESSING

"At the start of the course, we explained to our students why they were doing the course and how it would benefit them while at Collyer's and in the future. The key points were that it would help them to reason, unravel their arguments and present their points constructively and in a more advanced way. This was important for all students regardless of the subjects that they had chosen."

Steve admits there was initial concern from some of the students that the course did not apply to them. This view tended to be driven by their desire to study only subjects they had chosen from the 50 on offer, rather than a credible argument about the educational benefits of the course.

OCR'S THINKING AND REASONING SKILLS QUALIFICATION HELPS CANDIDATES TO:

- PROCESS AND EVALUATE INFORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF DECISION MAKING, REASONING AND PROBLEM SOLVING
- REACH CONCLUSIONS AND DECISIONS USING ARGUMENTS AND EVIDENCE
- DEVELOP SKILLS OF ENQUIRY AND RESEARCH EXPLORING ISSUES FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES
- THINK CREATIVELY BY GENERATING AND EXPLORING IDEAS AND POSSIBILITIES, MAKING ORIGINAL CONNECTIONS
- DEVELOP SKILLS OF EVALUATION IN RELATION TO EVIDENCE AND TESTIMONY AND REASONING
- ULTIMATELY, DEPLOY THESE SKILLS HOLISTICALLY AND CREATIVELY IN THINKING THROUGH PROBLEMS AND QUESTIONS.

"We explained that Thinking and Reasoning Skills wasn't designed to compete with their chosen subjects; it's an additional course intended to help students with their other courses, as well as their future academic and career prospects," adds Steve.

According to Steve, one of the benefits of having a wide range of teaching staff involved is that it helps students to learn and apply the key skills of the course from a range of different viewpoints.

"We have a range of teachers from across the college working with a range of topics and alternative examples," explains Steve. "If you have a good variety of examples, students will dip into their own reserves for topics of discussion."

He adds: *"It's easy to get hung up on the sophistication of subject matter – most students understand the importance of having knowledge – but Thinking and Reasoning Skills is about how that knowledge is used and applied. While the topic may be highly interesting or thought-provoking, the key learning aim is actually how you go about forming and presenting arguments.*

"You may not be a subject matter expert, but you can use Thinking and Reasoning Skills to understand and evaluate how information is being used, and that's the whole point."

Despite the initial concerns about how the course would be viewed, students at Collyer's achieved an overall pass rate of 96% for the first module with a good number achieving merits and distinctions.

"The fact that some of our students didn't pass helped to make it clear to all that this qualification is not simply a walk in the park," says Steve. "It's different to what they are used to and the penny began to drop with our students as the course progressed and they were able to apply their skills in other subjects and situations.

As well as good traditional A Levels, universities and employers are looking for evidence of really good understanding, analysis and, most importantly, evaluative capabilities, so the students who passed this qualification can now add this to their personal statement when applying for university places or jobs."

Commenting on OCR's support, Steve adds: *"The qualification is very well supported with good information on the OCR website and our course co-ordinator has attended meetings which have been very helpful. As the qualification was new to us, it was especially useful to have regular email contact and we were also part of the wider network to ask questions of other colleges. The Qualification Manager at OCR has been really helpful in providing clarification for us when we have needed it."*

One year on and Collyer's plans to double the number of students taking OCR's Thinking and Reasoning Skills to just over 500 students.

"It's been a learning experience for all of us, but we're very pleased with how the qualification has worked and our aim now is to make it even better," concludes Steve.

For further information about The College of Richard Collyer, visit: www.collyers.ac.uk

Further information about the SFBac can be found at: www.sfcforum.org.uk/sfbac

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STEVE NICHOLLS, VICE PRINCIPAL