FAQ - Frequently Asked Questions and Tips related to

Making Learning and Thinking Visible in Italian Secondary Schools (MLTV)

Carin Aquiline, December, 2018

What kinds of students are these tools helpful for?

Documentation, group learning, and thinking routines can help us recognize, extend, and strengthen the thinking and learning of any student. Several *MLTV* teachers reported that thinking routines and group learning elicited greater participation and confidence from their lower-performing students. Another teacher began the year believing that the tools and practices would help her lower-performing students, but found that they helped the high-achieving ones as well. In her words, students developed a more critical attitude toward the content and stronger habits of reflection, leading to deeper analysis and greater attention to the language they used to express their thinking.

If I want to deepen and make my students' thinking and learning visible, is using a thinking routine the best way to start*?*

Possibly, but not necessarily. There are different paths you can start down to nurture students as creators of collaborative knowledge. You could start by identifying the type of thinking you'd like to foster, and then using a thinking routine targeting that type of thinking. You could also start by using a new strategy to support learning in groups (e.g., be more intentional about how you form small groups; ask students to use a protocol to give feedback to one another on a work in progress). Or you could start by documenting to support your own or students' learning (e.g., use your phone to record a small group conversation, then listen to it, ideally with colleagues, to help shape subsequent lessons; select excerpts to share back with students to extend, deepen, or challenge their learning). Once you begin, you will likely find that the paths of *MLV* and *VT* intersect and overlap in ways that make each more powerful.

How often should I document?

The decision to document should be guided by purpose, not frequency. Why are you documenting? Whose learning are you hoping to support--your students', your own, the public's? How will the documentation be used? These are the types of questions that should determine whether to document or not. (See also the Tip in the following section about how much documentation to collect.)

What is the difference between documentation and display?

The main difference between display and documentation is that display focuses on what you did; documentation focuses on what you (or others) learned. Display aims to share work and progress; documentation aims to deepen learning by provoking or addressing questions about learning and

teaching. It is a form of inquiry into past moments of learning meant to inform future learning and teaching. (See also Documentation and Display: What's the Difference?)

When does documentation make learning visible?

Documentation makes learning visible when it "focuses on some aspect of learning--not just 'what we did'--and prompts questions and promotes conversation among children and adults that deepen and extend learning" (Krechevsky, *et al,* 2013). Documentation serves different purposes at different stages of the learning process, but in general, documentation that makes learning visible helps us examine moments of learning, raise or address questions about teaching and learning, and/or suggest next steps for teaching and learning. (See also Documentation: When Does It Make Learning Visible?)

How important is it to meet with my colleagues in person to share and analyze documentation?

In a survey taken near the end of the *MLTV* project, teachers overwhelmingly agreed that meeting face-to-face with colleagues to share documentation is central to understanding teaching and learning, and that sharing documentation face-to-face with colleagues offers benefits that aren't realized through other ways of sharing (e.g., online or messaging apps). Teachers found that the depth and focus of protocol-guided conversations weren't matched by digital online exchanges, and that hearing other people's perspectives was critical to helping them analyze documentation from their students. Teachers also appreciated how the protocol structure helped all participants, not just the presenting teacher, find implications for their own work from the documentation that was shared.

How can paying close attention to one group of students help me plan instruction for the entire class*?*

The more detailed and contextualized a piece of documentation is, the more it supports robust analysis of teaching and learning. Following one group of students makes it possible to collect detailed documentation. As one *MLTV* teacher said, " If we focus on one group, we can follow the complete process of learning more deeply, and learn something about how that group is learning that applies to all students." In other words, the expectation is that something will emerge from documenting a few students that informs our teaching for all students. There are different ways we can learn from following one group closely:

- We might notice something that we want to share with the other small groups in order to deepen their learning. For example, if, in the group you are documenting, one student takes the lead in suggesting ideas and the others simply accept those ideas, you might report what you saw to the class and ask, "Did every group find it this easy to come to agreement?"
- Students can surprise us. Following a group closely can show us capabilities, strategies, and processes for learning that we hadn't considered, thereby helping us serve all students.

- We can extend our understanding of learning processes. Following one group's complete process, rather than bits of the process from several groups, adds to the store of professional experience and knowledge on which we base our instructional decisions for other students.

MLTV teachers also found that when they shared documentation from one group of students back to the class, it helped all students reflect on and extend their learning. (This mirrors teachers finding implications for their own teaching from a conversation about another teacher's documentation.)

How do these tools apply to math and technical subjects?

The broad answer is that, because these frameworks focus on developing students' thinking and learning capacities, they apply to all disciplines. In Section V.ii of the *Avanguardie Educative* guidelines (not currently available to the public), you will find multiple written and video examples of technical and mathematics teachers using the tools and reflecting on their use in technical and scientific disciplines.

How do these approaches fit with standards-based instruction? How can I afford the time to use these approaches when I have to prepare students for end-of-year exams?

The *MLTV* tools and practices offer many possibilities for helping students develop a robust grasp of the content in a discipline. It is up to individual teachers to decide how to integrate the approaches into their existing practice. For example, you could decide to use group learning activities to help students understand content that is required by the standards, and that might be on their exams. You might also find that these approaches help you reach your goals in unexpected ways. One *MLTV* teacher found that when she used a thinking routine to help her students understand grammatical features of English, students didn't need to complete as many drills as usual because they understood the grammar points more quickly.

I'm a mathematics/science/technical teacher. How can colleagues who teach the humanities from humanistic disciplines offer useful comments on my students' work? (NOTE: This question could just as easily be: *"I teach in a humanistic discipline. How can colleagues from technical/scientific/ mathematical disciplines offer useful comments on my students' work?")*

The protocols that guide collaborative analysis of documentation focus on examining the thinking and learning visible in the documentation, rather than on issues specific to the content students are studying. According to Ritchhart *et al* (2011), when students' thinking becomes the focus of professional discussion, rather than issues related to delivering or assessing disciplinary content, teachers across disciplines find applications to their content and sometimes become willing to try tools (e.g., a specific thinking routine) that they didn't think applied to their content. Furthermore, the group of colleagues can develop a common sense of purpose, deciding to focus as a group on a particular issue of thinking and learning that applies to all students. That said, at least one *MLTV* math teacher thought he might benefit more from a discussion with colleagues from his own discipline.

How can I help students become comfortable with being video-recorded?

If your students are uncomfortable being video-recorded, or if you are afraid the presence of the camera will change students' reactions, you can gradually desensitize students to the presence of the video-recorder. Start by simply setting up the camera in the room. Put it in a visible location, but don't use it. Once students perceive the camera as a fixture in the classroom, turn it on but don't focus it on particular students. Finally, when students see being recorded as a normal part of the class activity, you can focus the camera on a particular group or student.

As an additional consideration, students in *MLTV* classrooms reported that they were more comfortable being recorded by their classmates than by their teachers. If you choose this route, talk with the class first about the purpose and focus of the documentation, and other considerations for effective video-recording.

TIPS

- *"Only collect as much documentation as you have time to revisit."* (B. Mardell, 2015) The full power of documentation comes from analyzing the documentation, not from collecting the documentation. You do not have to document every day, or every student in a class. Refer to the FAQ section for a discussion of how documenting one group can yield insights that benefit the entire class.
- *When you begin using a particular thinking routine, use the standard form of the routine.* After you and your students have become familiar with the routine and how it works to elicit thinking, you can modify the routine if necessary to more effectively support the thinking you are targeting.
- *Selecting the material to use with a thinking routine is as important as choosing which routine to use* to support your target thinking. If there is not much to think about in the source material (because it is too abbreviated, or it lacks nuance, complexity, or ambiguity, etc.), it's hard to elicit good thinking from students.
- *Don't be discouraged if students' initial responses to a thinking routine are superficial or don't show much thinking.* This doesn't mean the routine (or the students, or the teacher) has "failed." It is a natural stage in making thinking visible. Analyze the responses (ideally with colleagues) to identify ways you can promote deeper thinking from your students in subsequent uses of the routine.
- *Remember, one goal of a thinking routine is to make the target thinking routine.* You are likely to see greater development of your students' thinking by using one or two thinking routines consistently than by using many different routines once or twice.
- *Take care when creating recording sheets for students to keep track of their responses during a thinking routine.* A recording sheet that funnels students toward a predetermined response (e.g. "What do you notice about the snake? What is in its mouth? What color is its back?") or bounds the student's response undermines the goal of opening up and extending thinking.

- *Look for opportunities to hand over to students aspects of "thinking work" that you usually do* (e.g., grouping student responses into categories or analyzing them; keeping track of unresolved questions and reading them back to the class at its next meeting).
- *Protocols exist to serve people; people don't exist to serve protocols.* (M. Krechevsky, 2015) If you need to extend the time allotments of a protocol in order to have a more meaningful conversation, try extending the time! If someone offers an interpretation during the "see" phase, simply ask them to point to what they see that leads to their interpretation. In other words, let the protocol constraints *support*, rather than *get in the way of*, the conversation.