

Check for the 'C' word

Geoff Howard

Technology Adviser, North Yorkshire

What is it that makes a D&T activity a D&T activity? If I enter a classroom and all are speaking French I can make a confident guess as to what the lesson is — what are the tell-tale signs for D&T?

Two primary children helped me to begin to see some possible answers. The first was five years old. Oliver came home from school clutching a 'shaking stick' he had made. This consisted of a 300mm length of 8mm square timber with about a dozen strips of coloured paper taped to the end.

He was unable to tell me why he had made this 'shaking stick' and further questioning revealed that apart from colouring in the stick, everything else had been done by the teacher. I should stress at this point that this was a good teacher in a good school and the activity had not been intended to be a D&T activity. But what if it had?

It occurred to me that all that is really required is that the pupils understand why they are doing what they are doing and are given some choice as to how they do it. Oliver could at least have cut his own piece of wood to a length he thought right. He could have chosen which strips to use from a range of coloured one, crinkly ones, light ones or shiny ones and been encouraged to say why he chose them. He could select from a number of possibilities, how to fix the strips to the top of his stick eg. tape, glue, stapler, Blu-Tack.

The second pupil was a six year old girl. Emma was charged with the task of designing an envelope in which to send a special thank you letter to her friend. She had started by looking at lots of different envelopes which other pupils had brought in. Some of them had been opened up to show the net. She had noted that some were white and some were brown; some were large and some small; some opened along the short side and some the long; some had windows and others had special markings on them.

From a range of four different papers she had been offered she chose squared paper to try out her design first and some pretty lilac coloured paper to make it from. She experimented with the different glues and tapes she could choose from and discovered that there was a need for one more. Envelopes have two kinds of glue: parts are stuck when you buy them and the flap has to be licked to stick it down. In spite of otherwise impeccable preparation her teacher

had not managed to provide a glue she could lick to stick — but Emma had identified the need for it!

As I reflected upon these two activities I dwelt upon the importance of context and choice in D&T activities. Could the answer lie in the 'C' word? The letter 'C' does seem to crop up an awful lot: capability, competence, control, craft ...is this the 'C' word I am looking for?

There are those who would say yes and I certainly do not deny the importance of craft but in my check list, I opted instead for five other 'C's Context, Choice, Creativity, Communication and Quality (well if the 3 'R's is an acceptable abbreviation — why not?).

These five 'C's comprise my litmus test for D&T activities:

■ Context

Do the pupils know why they are doing what they are doing? Have they discussed the designing situation?

■ Choice

Are pupils able to exercise some choice over their design, materials and construction? How does the teacher structure and prompt these choices? How does pupils' choice increase as they become more capable of handling variables?

■ Creativity

Are pupils provided with the required range of media, skills and strategies? Is there a visually stimulating environment? Can a display of appropriate resources be used to stimulate a child's imagination and provide some starting points? Can the design task start from AT4?

■ Communication

Are pupils given opportunities to make presentations of their work to others? Do they discuss possibilities in groups? Are they encouraged to communicate graphically, verbally, and in writing?

■ Quality

Is there quality of experience and of end product? How is it managed? What are our expectations? What criteria are used for assessment? Are these known to both teacher and pupils from the outset?

yes, lets put the 'C's into D&T!