

Researching our practice using The Discipline of Noticing

A Practice Insight Working Paper by Daniel Brown

In essence, *The Discipline of Noticing* provides a systematic approach towards noticing possibilities for acting differently in the moment. The Discipline of Noticing was developed by John Mason, former Professor of Mathematics Education at the Open University and author of a number of books on teaching mathematics. This book took Mason over 20 years to write, following Mason's contact with J.G. Bennett in the 1970s. This article provides a brief summary of my experience of using this approach alongside colleagues as a framework for professional development. The context was a mathematics department of a large inner city London sixth form college.

There is much more to The Discipline of Noticing than *just noticing*, but it is the first step. It starts by noticing something that is significant for us. It may be something that evokes a feeling in us, or perhaps a resonance with something someone has said, or something we have read. The next step is a movement from noticing to what Mason calls *marking* - becoming able to recall what was noticed - through to *recording*. Mason suggests recording

significant events through writing descriptive, *brief-but vivid* accounts,

'If we want to be in a position to analyse some event, some situation, then we must first be clear on what that event or situation consists of, as impartially as possible.' (Mason, 2002, p.39)

Mason describes this as *accounting-of*, not *accounting-for*. An *account-of* describes events as objectively as possible. We found that this is not as easy as it might seem, and that trying to record what was said and done as accurately as possible was a basis for a good account. Here is an example of such an account made by my colleague Katy Sillem, who focuses on a student's response to her teacher question 'What do you think?':

"About 30 minutes into the first lesson of the day, Student M said: "Miss you always say think! ... I think... What do you think? ... It's really frustrating. Either it is, or it isn't. I've got a headache and I want to know if it is or it isn't." I had said that I thought $1 - 2$ and $1 + -2$ are equivalent,

agreeing with a student who claimed they were.”

Whilst it only takes a few minutes each day to record one or two accounts, we found that systematically recording accounts was not easy. Whilst all six teachers in the department considered The Discipline of Noticing to be a good idea, only three of us managed to systematically record accounts over a period of time. Setting oneself to notice and systematically record events requires commitment.

The next step of The Discipline of Noticing is to come together to share and discuss common themes, a process Mason calls *validation*. We held optional meetings once a week, which were well attended, even by those who were not regularly making accounts. The way we held these meetings was crucial. We found that it was important that people could speak at length without fear of being interrupted, judged, or receiving unsolicited advice. It transformed the way we listened to, and supported, each other as a department. After sharing an account, we would probe an account, or part of an account, in more detail. Often we found that we had similar accounts that we could offer in return. Often, we found it beneficial to explore particular words and phrases in more depth. Often these were words used to

describe emotions, such as *'frustration'*.

During validation, we considered possibilities for acting differently. We found it useful to move away from 'if onlys' and 'should haves' towards questions along the lines of: 'How could I have acted differently? How might things have been different if...?'

This sequence means that by recording what happened as accurately as possible, and exploring other possibilities, comes the chance that we might recognise a *possibility* for acting differently in the moment.

'Choosing in the moment to act in a certain way requires two things: noticing a possibility to choose (i.e. recognizing some typical situation about to unfold), and having alternatives from which to choose... Finding yourself doing something is easy; catching yourself about to do something and choosing to act differently in a more informed manner, is much harder...' (Mason, 2002, p.72)

I have found that recognising some situation about to unfold, in time to do something about it, is the difficult part, particularly if I am acting through habit, or an action that is grounded in some firmly held belief. One way of doing this, and the part that I personally find most difficult, is to *imagine* myself acting differently in a

similar situation in the future, in order, as Mason suggests, to ‘...draw the moment of awakening from the retrospective into the present, closer and closer to the point at which a choice can be made.’ (p.75)

The work of The Discipline of Noticing, then, is to become more sensitive to habitual behaviours that may be more or less helpful, towards recognising and then making available other possibilities for acting. It is not easy to measure the effect this work had on teaching, and children’s learning. There was an improvement in exam results, although it is impossible to say how much of this can be attributed to this work on noticing. All of the teachers who took part felt very positively about it. My colleague, Christian Atwell, described it as follows:

“For me, the Discipline of Noticing is about learning to notice, to listen, to try and do things differently, to care more about what you are doing. It is about believing that you have the power to effect change. For me, it is about supporting and challenging colleagues, resulting in the deepening of professional and personal relationships.”

We found that we became increasingly able to challenge each other’s beliefs and practices. I suspect this comes from the formation of trust. In an attempt to

illustrate the power of the Discipline of Noticing, I provide this reflection made by my colleague Katy around a year after making the account recorded above:

“Asking, ‘What do you think?’ comes from a vague sense of well-meaning - trying to empower students. But I believe that I may have a reticence to tell people what is the truth and what isn’t. Students have on many occasions expressed frustration about the way I was going about things saying things like: “You don’t teach us anything”, and, “Just tell me the answer”. I often resist the pressure to tell, and continue to expect them to come up with some justification for themselves. It is difficult to know whether I should develop ways of helping students become more able to cope with this ‘not telling’, or whether I have misjudged the amount of assertive direction needed in certain situations. I have become more aware of the continuum between telling, and encouraging students to form their own opinions and explanations during this project, and have since experimented with moving around it as consciously as possible.”

The level of Katy’s self-reflection came through the freedom to research her own practice with others, for which The

Discipline of Noticing provides an excellent framework.

Finally, a note of caution. Whilst professional development is about personal change, I think it is dangerous to desire or expect it. Paradoxically, in realising that we cannot change others, change becomes possible. This is echoed

in this mantra from The Discipline of Noticing: “*I cannot change others, I can only work at changing myself*”, which I have adapted to: “*I cannot change others, but I can help create a climate in which change becomes possible.*”

References

- Mason, J. (2002) *The Discipline of Noticing: Researching Your Own Practice*, London: Routledge
- Atwell, C., Brown, D & Sillem, K. (2017) Researching our practice using the Discipline of Noticing: The experience of a mathematics department. Research report found at <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B5-iptbjl3NTZzJST0w3NjQyQkk>