"But What can I do About it?" Using Design Thinking in the Classroom to Increase Advocacy in Year 11 Girls

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Abstract

This action research project introduced design thinking as an approach to problem solving with two classes of Year 11 students studying GCSE Religious Studies in an all-girls' environment. Students were supported in developing skills of empathy, redefining problems of social injustice, exploring (or ideating) potential solutions, and planning their future actions. This was done with the aim of increasing their confidence to advocate for others. Student feedback, in the form of online surveys and focus group interviews, was used to show that after using Design Thinking, students felt greater confidence to advocate and had even begun to take small steps towards acting on behalf of marginalised groups. It was evident that students found engaging in personal acts of support, such as signing petitions or educating themselves, to be doable but needed greater support to engage with the more active advocacy behaviours, such as protesting.

Glossary

Problem Solving: In the context of this research, problem solving refers to finding workable, practical ways to support marginalised and oppressed communities. This is in line with Hung's (2018) definition of problems in Humanities subjects as "wicked problems" or problems which are indeterminate, having no clear right or wrong solutions, only better or worse ones. These problems cannot be approached scientifically, since each of these social problems will be different and unique and there is no science of the particular.

Design Thinking: A way of approaching a problem that requires students to deliberately go through the following thinking process: empathise with the community, define the problem from their perspective, ideate all practical and potential solutions, and test/prototype the preferred solution. For this research, I substituted the final "Prototype" stage for a "Plan" stage, as we were focusing on building confidence to advocate in the future, not forcing students to take action on every issue we studied.

Confidence to Advocate: The willingness to search for practical solutions on behalf of others, especially those who are marginalised. This may not be a definitive action a student will take but something they could envisage themselves doing in the future as a way of supporting the group who need advocacy and to potential bring about desired social change.

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Problem solving has always been a fundamental aspect of education; however, in Humanities subjects, the problems we deal with are of a less tangible nature and have much less direct solutions. These problems take the form of societal issues with which students often feel a passionate and personal connection. It has also been shown that engaging in youth activism projects provides a way for young people to lobby for change to the structures and institutions, which are necessary for their long-term health and life prospects (Ballard & Ozer, 2016; Boehnke & Wong, 2011).

As teachers, we must ensure we provide our students with the necessary tools to approach not only social injustices in their own lives but in those of the people and communities around them. While solving problems in this sphere may not be immediately possible for our students, equipping them with the skills of empathy and giving them an understanding of what effective activism looks like is important. I have, however, noticed that students often feel that the social issues we face are insurmountable or that they don’t know what would be a helpful action to take to support a cause they care about. As they lack the confidence that they can effect change, students stop looking for ways to do so. It was for this reason, I decided to investigate whether there was a different method which students could be taught to use in approaching these problems.

I had previously observed the effectiveness of using design thinking as part of an off-timetable team-building exercise where students had to figure out how to start a community on Mars. Recognising the potential for this approach to be transferred to my own classroom, I designed a series of lessons for a class studying a unit on Human Rights and Social Justice, whereby I could investigate whether prolonged use of design thinking could improve students’ confidence in solving ethical and social problems. The aim of this was to help students realise that they are capable of affecting real world change which benefits others and to build their confidence in doing this regularly in the future. . My action research thus aimed to answer the question: could design thinking develop confidence to advocate for greater social change in Year 11 girls?

Action research was the most suitable way to investigate this question as, in line with Mertler (2020), this method of research is conducted by teachers as a way to improve or change their teaching practice. It provided me with the opportunity to evaluate an aspect of my teaching based on students’ engagement, experience, and feedback, and to make meaningful changes to my pedagogy as a result. Further, as confidence is often difficult to measure, making use of qualitative data from a range of sources allowed my students to feel their voices were heard and gave them the opportunity to give honest feedback on the impact of using design thinking on their problem-solving capacity.

Literature Review

Engaging students in advocacy is becoming an increasingly important aspect of girls' education. Although there are some exciting initiatives being set up, such as the online, student-led https://www.blackstudentsdemandingchange.org/ (2022), which originated in New York, these are not common in educational environments. Sloam (2014) showed that while there is a general decline in participation in conventional politics, students are not apathetic, but care deeply about social justice and inequality. Instead, young people are participating in social movements in less formal ways, making use of social media to become informed of events and share information with each other (Bosch, 2017; Mercea & Yilmaz, 2018). This informal interest is certainly important; however, without effective problem-solving skills, students can be unsure of how to take the proper action to affect the social change they desire. Further, Sampermans, et al. (2018) found that when engaged with social movements informally, “some voices will sound louder while other voices disappear into the crowd” (p.14). In the same paper they suggest that gender differences become more pronounced in this setting. We need to ensure, therefore, that students feel confident in advocating for social change, and that they know that their actions can be impactful. This is where we need to research how best to get girls to approach social problems, which are often complex and have no well-defined solutions.

Developing confidence to advocate is particularly important for girls in their final years of secondary education. Much of the literature focuses on students in higher education, but as research carried out by Kuhn et al. for the National Foundation for Educational Research (2021) concluded, “15-year-olds are in a crucial period of transition from childhood to adulthood” (p.6), as between the ages of 13-15 most major cognitive, emotional, and behavioural changes occur. Further, it has been found that the variety of unfamiliar situations encountered in later adolescence, coupled with the intense emotional reactions these can provoke, can lead to students developing the ability to “think further than the present, envision implication and grasp the complexity of relationships” (Karibeeran & Mohanty, 2019, p.1). These developments often generate greater levels of autonomy and freedom of thought, allowing students to consider concepts such as justice with greater emotional maturity. However, while girls are likely to have high levels of interest in issues requiring advocacy, boys are much more likely to voice their opinions and assume leadership roles (Campbell & Saunders, 2002; Gibbons, 2012. This cannot continue; if we are to address issues of inequality, then we need to ensure girls are also leading in this area. As Kevin Stannard (2019) wrote, “Today’s girls’ schools serve to subvert, rather than support, gender stereotypes … empowering successful, confident and adventurous girls” (p.4). As such, we must devise strategies for promoting confidence to advocate in girls.

One way to strengthen girls' voices is through developing problem-solving skills. In Humanities subjects problems are often "ill-structured," having incomplete information, unclear boundaries, and tendencies to evolve over time (Simon, 1996), and, as such, can appear unsolvable. This is not the case, but they do require a different approach to problem solving where students use both technical understanding of the issue and empathetic understanding of the people involved. If we can develop girls' confidence in solving problems using empathy, it is likely they will be more inclined to advocate for social change.

In the UK, one way empathic problem-solving skills are taught is through philosophical inquiry, which usually takes place in Religious Studies classrooms. As Siddiqui, Gorard and See (2019) found, philosophical inquiry "makes pupils think out of the box and see different perspectives of one thing" (p.12). Approaching problem solving in this way can then lead to greater confidence in advocacy because students will see how they can change the way in which they experience the world. However, as Kurup, Levinson, and Li (2021) note, "there is a gap as the normal school curriculum does not engage [students] in the real world" (p. 182). If we are asking students to use problem solving for issues of social justice, we must ensure they are able to seek out practical solutions of their own, rather than relying on ideas given to them.

The use of design thinking has been well established as a way of approaching problem solving where problems are more ambiguous and centred on people rather than scientific data (Dam, & Siang, 2018). There has been success in trialling the Four Step Design Thinking process in philosophy classes (Hung, 2018) and it has also been shown that using design thinking increases students' ability to think critically (Lapuz & Fulgencio, 2020). While there are various ways to use design thinking, at it's core are always four key aspects which always begin with empathising with, and defining the needs of, those affected by a problem. This is crucial to problem solving related to social issues, as without practical empathy girls may not know what actions might be effective.

Feshbach and Feshbach (2009) note the importance of being able to recognise shared experiences when students are engaging with social issues such as poverty, or marginalized populations The design thinking process is not an endeavour that students can approach on their own, but only in collaboration with their peers. McCurdy, Nickels and Bush (2020) note that when using design thinking, "students can be in the midst of the problem and begin to ask their team members questions that they may not have considered before" (p. 49). By encouraging students to work together, a greater empathetic understanding of the problem may be developed that an individual student would not have come to alone (Sfard & Kieran, 2001).

The role of empathy and collaboration at the start of problem solving seems to give students a sense of value in what they are doing, which is especially relevant when

facilitating advocacy in teenage girls. As Carroll (2014) suggests, when design thinking is used in problem solving, students truly believe in their ability to effect change in our world. My research, therefore, aimed to harness this key aspect of design thinking and facilitate students use of design thinking to become more confident in their ability to advocate for themselves and others.

Research Context

Northwood College is an Independent Day School for girls in North West London. I carried out my research with 26 Year 11 students (aged 15-16) who studied the Religious Studies course at GCSE level, and who I had taught for 18 months, including a unit called Human Rights and Social Justice. As well, the students were in that key transitional stage cited by the NFER (2021), where they had entered young adulthood and become capable of taking on greater responsibility for their own actions in response to issues of injustice. I requested permission from their parents via a digital signature to confirm that they were happy for me to use data provided by their daughter in this paper. Students were also given a full briefing before taking any surveys or focus group interviews, where I reassured them that their anonymity was guaranteed and reminded them of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage. In both classes, all students fully participated in all aspects of the research without any concern.

Action

The action stage of my research took place during a unit revising the topic of Human Rights and Social Justice, which had been studied in the previous academic year. Prior to this, I had asked students to complete a survey on their experience of advocacy and their confidence in problem solving. During each lesson, we recapped key content on each issue of social justice (for example, women's rights, racism, poverty, refugees), before moving to the problem-solving part of the lesson. Students then worked through each of the four stages of design thinking.

During the "Empathise" stage, I provided students with advice on websites or documents they could use to fully research the group affected by the social issue, which helped them move more efficiently in stage two where they defined the problem. In this stage, the students were shown how to change the language they used to state the specific problem from the generic (i.e., X is wrong) to the person-focused (i.e., Group Y should be able to do Z). Students were then allowed to ideate in groups, sharing ideas on advocacy behaviours or actions and gaining different perspectives on what might be effective or possible.

During the course of the research, it became clear that in this stage each group needed to be split into small sub-groups, focusing on one type of advocacy behaviour–either individual, collective or organisational action. This gave the students the opportunity to

reflect on what the outcomes of each possible action might be, and thus evaluate the effectiveness of the actions with greater clarity. The final stage was for students to decide on what action they believe would be most suitable and reflect on what considerations they would need to make before carrying out this action in future.

Data Collection

In my data collection, I employed a variety of methods to ensure that my research provided clear, objective evidence as to the effectiveness of using the design thinking process. Given that my research focused on confidence building and problem solving when dealing with non-scientific questions, I made use of qualitative data to assess the impact of the action on the students. As such, my data were generated from online surveys, observations, and focus group interviews. This type of polyangulation ensured my research was trustworthy, authentic, and reliable (Mertler, 2020).

Prior to the start of the project, students were asked to complete a survey on how they approached problems involving social justice. This gave me a baseline against which I could measure the development of confidence and problem-solving skills in the students, both individually and as a collective. Further surveys were carried out during the research using similar questions to the original one. Conducting the surveys periodically allowed me to make, as suggested by de Vaus (2014) “systematic comparison between cases on the same characteristics” (p.6). The surveys used both Likert scales and open-ended questions, which allowed me to chart trends and code my data with greater clarity.

During my research, two other colleagues and I conducted observations of the students in lessons and engaged them in informal discussions about the process, which generated more spontaneous insights into how they felt as they approached problem solving in a new way. In my observations, I recorded separately both what I saw and how I interpreted this, allowing more accurate reflections on the observations when viewed alongside feedback to the surveys. My colleagues’ observations gave me an objective perspective as they were detached from the research, which ensured greater reliability when analysing the data collected in this phase.

Many students also participated in voluntary focus group interviews after the end of the course of study. These interviews used a semi-structured approach, with a set of questions planned for each group but retaining the flexibility to explore their comments further to generate a richer understanding of the impact that using design thinking had on them.

Data Analysis

Once data were collected, I reviewed and reflected on the responses given in the surveys, looking for evidence of any growth in awareness, assertiveness, and confidence to advocate. I transcribed the feedback given in the focus group meetings and coded the responses to look for patterns and connections in the insights provided by each student's experience of using design thinking. This allowed me to draw conclusions on the effectiveness of using design thinking in relation to social justice. To ensure objectivity in this analysis, I discussed the results with the other teachers who had observed the students and compared the feedback from students with their observations.

Discussion of Results

My project's aim was to introduce a deliberate design thinking approach in the Humanities and assess whether this could improve engagement with political advocacy and problem solving in response to social problems lacking clear paths and definitive answers. After analysing the data, it was clear that this approach had some success in improving problem solving, although there are limits to the practical implications of design thinking. Several clear themes emerged during the analysis.

Design Thinking is Easy to use and can Develop Confidence in Problem Solving

One of the aims of this investigation was to see if students could implement a new problem-solving technique when approaching issues centred on social justice. During lessons, students worked through the four stages of design thinking, stopping after each stage to check-in, share progress, and talk through what they needed to do in the next stage. When asked in a post-course survey, students were generally very positive about using design thinking, with one remarking, "I enjoy breaking problems down into more solvable parts which are easier to digest and I can think of creative solutions." Further, in the same survey, 21 of 26 students reported that they were better at problem solving after their introduction to design thinking than they were at the start of the course. This was also reported in the focus group interviews, where one student commented, "It was much easier to do it step by step and see all the things you've collected so far [and] to be able to refresh and recollect all the information that you gathered." Another reported, "It helps you put yourself at the centre of the problem and from there you can identify the different areas that need solutions." This is clear evidence that students found the process of design thinking easy to use and understood how to work through the four steps to approach problems in a more structured way.

The students also reported that they began using aspects of design thinking when doing work for other subjects, with 13 of 26 respondents singling out another Humanities subject, such as History or Geography, where they had applied design thinking to a piece of independent work. In response to the same question, five students reported using design

thinking in Science lessons. In discussion with the Subject Leader for Science I found that all students actually use design thinking in lessons, but their department did not label the approach specifically. Explicitly labelling design thinking as a problem-solving tool and deliberately teaching each stage as a skill was important in developing better problem-solving skills in the students and building their confidence in using this approach independently outside of my particular classroom.

Design Thinking Supports Students in Finding a Greater Range of Solutions to Problems

Making use of design thinking had a clear effect on students' ability to devise potential solutions to social problems. In a pre-course survey, seven of 24 students believed they knew what advocacy was, and when given the chance to write a definition of advocacy, three responses could be classed as defining it as “protest” and another four defined it as “standing up for something.” These findings indicate a general, but not clear, understanding of advocacy, and thus a lack of knowledge on how to bring about social change. This reflects the research by Sloam (2014) that students are less engaged in traditional forms of advocacy.

As part of the course, we focused on developing the “Ideate” stage of design thinking. This focus involved students splitting into sub-groups to investigate specific advocacy activities relevant to the topic of study for that lesson, which they could suggest to their larger team. Each sub-team was given a focus (i.e., personal action, group action, organisational action), which allowed them to better understand the impact of different actions on the people facing injustice, and to build a greater knowledge of what advocacy behaviours exist and are actionable. Following this, in a post-course survey 25 out of 26 students believed they could now define advocacy and their own definitions included a range of previously unconsidered actions, such as “peer mediating and debating,” “organising a campaign,” “spreading awareness in the school newsletter,” giving or attending an “educational talk,” “volunteering for a local group,” and “lobbying the government.” The range of responses made it nearly impossible to codify students’ definition of advocacy and suggests that using design thinking improved the students’ understanding of different types of action a person can take.

When asked in the focus group interviews about whether they felt more confident in finding solutions to social problems when using design thinking, one student reported that “I think it broadens our perspective on things. Rather than purely from our perspective on what we think issues could be, we opened up more ideas on other things they could be affected by.”

Design Thinking Increases Confidence to Advocate

Previous research has found that girls are less likely than boys to engage in political and socially conscious action (Gibbons, 2012; Sampermans et al. 2018). This was confirmed by the findings of a pre-course survey, where five of 24 students stated they can have an impact on making society more equal, compared to 23 of 24 who said the government, and 21 of 24 saying social media influencers. Once they had been introduced to design thinking, however, 16 out of 26 reported that they believed students of their age could have an impact. This is clear evidence that design thinking improved confidence in many students in approaching and solving social problems. These findings are further shown through responses to the question "What would stop you from advocating for something you believed in?" In the pre-course survey, 11 of 24 respondents mentioned "confidence" as a barrier to youth advocacy whereas by the end of the course this figure had fallen to five of 26. This was further supported by comments made in the focus group interviews where one student stated, "[Design thinking] also made us gain confidence ... you just feel more confident to actually use your voice to do something about the actual problem."

It is worth noting that the students were more likely to find subtle, non-confrontational actions as a means of advocacy easier to engage with. Given a list of potential actions, which they either are or would consider doing, 25 out of 26 respondents said they would sign a petition, as well as 22 saying they would educate themselves more, and 16 saying they would boycott a company involved in socially unjust practices. This compares to only nine saying they would write to their MP, and just two of 26 saying they would join the Youth Wing of a political party. This suggests that while design thinking allowed students to explore the range of ways societal change can occur, their confidence in enacting change was centred on low-stakes, personal action rather than large scale collective action. Further research would need to be done to determine if the reason for this low-stakes preference was down to factors such as socio-economic background, age, gender or something else.

Confidence to Turn Ideas into Action is Still a Difficulty for Students, but Design Thinking can Help

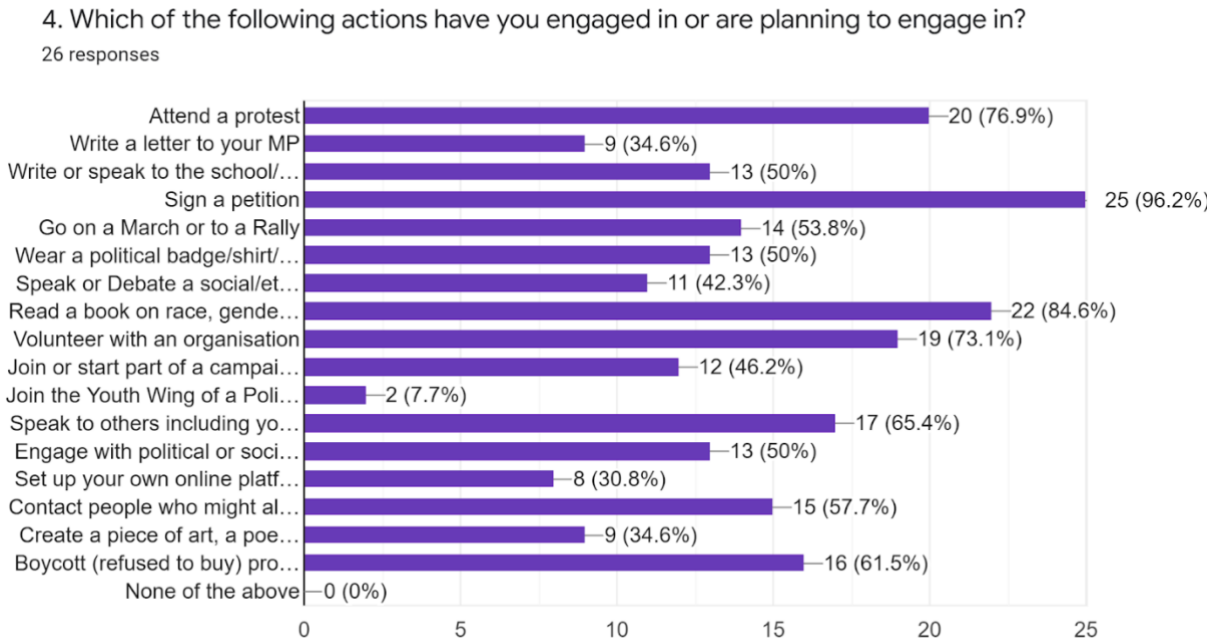
It was noticed by two observers that the final stage of the design thinking process was something students struggled with. In their feedback, the observers commented that while students had ideas about what action was needed, they were generally unable to turn ideas into potential actualities–lacking both the logistical understanding of how to act and the confidence to know which action they could take. In a mid-course survey garnering their feedback, the students confirmed this as well, with 13 of 26 picking the "Planning" stage as that which they found hardest (compared to just one out of 26 who found the "Empathise" stage hardest). Given the opportunity to explain their response, one student commented that "because sometimes the answer isn't as straightforward as you hoped for and it can become frustrating." Another said that "It's quite hard to narrow down the ways to help and so I found

it a little hard to choose a plan," and a third stated, "I get confused. I always write my plan in ideate." This suggests that while design thinking is useful as an academic problem-solving tool, it's practical application may be limited without careful implementation by the teacher.

Following the feedback stated above, I added a reflective moment into stage 3 ("Ideate") of the process and asked students to rank their potential solutions. This had a marked improvement on their ability to see what actions they or others might take in relation to the problem. One student remarked to an observer, "I found it a bit difficult to be able to plan at the beginning, but I am understanding how to plan better now." This sentiment was also reflected in student action. In a pre-course survey students were asked if they had ever advocated for something and only 10 of 24 students believed that they had. When asked the same question in the post-course survey, 21 of 26 reported an involvement in at least one activity which could be considered an advocacy behaviour. Further, when given a list of advocacy activities, the students all reported that they had, or were planning to, engage in at least one and, in most cases, several activities (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Student Engagement in Advocacy Activities



Finally, in their final survey, 25 of 26 students said their confidence in talking to others about issues of social injustice had grown. This indicates that once students were given adequate time in the final "Planning" stage, they saw what potential solutions might be worth exploring in future.

Conclusion

The introduction of design thinking improved students' confidence to advocate for social justice, and gave them a wider range of potentially effective actions they could take in their futures to bring about social change. Moreover, the development of their understanding of advocacy gave them a more positive attitude towards the small acts of advocacy which they could carry out immediately, and gave them confidence to engage in other justice-driven activities in the future. The key aspects of empathising with marginalised groups, redefining problems with people at the centre, and being given the chance to ideate in a group, made a crucial difference to their approach when dealing with problems of social justice.

It is also clear that while design thinking can be useful as an academic exercise, the final practical application of ideas needs further focus. The next stage in this research must, therefore, be to investigate how to effectively scaffold the planning stage to assist students in understanding of the logistics of advocacy (i.e., who they would need to speak to before taking action and how they would ensure what they're doing is safe). One of the main barriers to exploring this aspect of design thinking with this cohort was the constraints of them being an examination class in their final year of study. Thus, further research might best be done as part of an elective course or as an extra-curricular society focused on social justice. This would also allow the students' confidence to be measured in a more practical way—if the action they recognise as effective is actually acted upon.

Reflection

Undertaking this action research has been a profoundly positive experience for me. For some time, I have felt that my teaching of ethics and social justice was missing the practical application we desperately need from our future leaders, and this project has allowed me to explore how I can achieve this in my classroom. Although I was already considering using design thinking in some respect, this project has given me the chance to find an effective place for it, to properly plan and implement this method as a teaching tool, rather than try and squeeze it into a lesson and haphazardly approach it. I have also found connecting with educational literature a reinvigorating activity which has improved my own pedagogy already.

The feedback I have received from students and the engagement I have witnessed is inspiring me to think about the next steps in my research, and I am excited to see what we can achieve with our students as they continue to increase in confidence and take a more active role in their communities. I have found the support and guidance I received as a member of the NCGS Global Action Research Collaborative to be vital in my research, and I am grateful for the opportunity to be part of this organisation. I am indebted to my research supervisor, Karen Lewis from All Hallows' School, Queensland, Australia for the encouragement and advice she has given me. I am also fortunate enough to have worked

with Joanna Hughes and Rebecca Brown as colleagues at Northwood College who have supported my research, observing the lessons and discussing the process and my findings with me to provide the necessary clarity and objectivity in coming to my conclusions.

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