

TOOLS OF THE TRADE AT WORK

In a series showing how the tools and models featured in “Tools of the trade” work in practice, **Ruth McCarthy** explains how the Thinking Environment helped a coachee break through limiting assumptions

Sarah is 22. When she rang me in March, she was in the third year of her degree course at a London art college and was getting ready to present her degree exhibition. Except she wasn't doing the work – she couldn't get motivated and she couldn't bring herself to face her head of department. There were exactly three months to go.

When she first called me, she talked mostly about needing to work out her career route after she finished the course. I explained on the phone how the session would run. I told her that we would be working in a Thinking Environment, which meant that my role would be to do everything I could to help her think at her clearest and best.

I explained that she would be able to ask me for facts that might help her continue to think well and clearly, and that we would avoid advice and ‘telling’.

So when we had our first session, we were already contracted for a full Thinking Session, with Sarah as the Thinker and me as her Thinking Partner.

My first question to her was (as it always is) the Part One TE question: “What do you want to think about, and what are your thoughts?” This question is as open and encouraging as any question can be, and responses vary hugely with every Thinker.

Sarah needed to think (and speak) for quite a long time, mainly about her academic past at an independent school (when she failed to get into Oxford), her deep sense of personal failure, her poor A Levels despite brilliant GCSEs, her inability to ‘get on’ with her current studies.

When she stopped I waited, to see if she was still thinking – it's vital not to interrupt at a moment when a clear new idea might be happening. Then she said: “That's enough for now, I think.”

So I asked her: “What more do you think, or feel, or want to say?” This is an affirming question that recognises all the work done so far and encourages deeper thinking.

It led to a flood of new concerns and doubts about how she is seen in her peer group and by the tutors, and then to her deep fear of having to show her work in public.

Another “What more?” question revealed just how strong this fear was, and how much it was holding her back from doing anything – she felt paralysed by her own inaction.

Finally Sarah said: “That's everything, I really have finished.”

So I moved on to the Part Two question, to establish the further session goal. I asked her: “What more do you want to achieve in this session?”

This is a question that acknowledged how much she had already achieved alongside a specific request that she now identify the immediate goal for the rest of our time. We had contracted for 1.30hrs and this had taken about 40 minutes so far.

She thought for a while and ran over possibilities, all related to getting her exhibition work finished – in effect, further thinking. Then she said: “I want to apply myself to finishing – I know it's so important, why can't I do it?”

This is where the Thinking Partner encourages the Thinker to express the further goal in a concise way that is easy to memorise. Sarah confirmed that her further goal was ‘applying herself to finishing her exhibition’.

Now we moved into Part Three of the Thinking Session. I asked Sarah the first Assumption Question: “What are you assuming that is stopping you from applying yourself to finishing your exhibition?” She found this easy to process (sometimes a Thinker will hesitate over the word ‘assumption’) and it triggered a series of assumptions around the risks of showing her work to others, what her peer group would think, how it might make her feel even more useless and so on.

I asked her several times “what else are you assuming that stops you from applying yourself to finishing?” until she came to a halt, saying with a certain humour: “I can't think of a single other thing, can you?!”

The next step was to find the chief assumption. So I asked Sarah: “Out of those assumptions, or any others that spring to mind, which is the one most stopping you from applying yourself to finishing?”

That’s why it’s vital to memorise the further goal. Words contain a universe of meanings: if we use our words instead of the Thinker’s, he then has to navigate through a new universe to get back to what he really meant.

Sarah went over her assumptions until she suddenly said very firmly: “I’m assuming that my work will be worse than everyone else’s, and they’ll think I’m stupid.”

Then we moved onto testing this chief assumption to find out if it was true: something only the Thinker can know. So I asked Sarah: “Do you think it is true that your work will be worse than everyone else’s and they’ll think you’re stupid?” She hesitated. I could really see her struggling with it.

She said: “I know deep down that my work can’t be worse than everyone else’s, it just feels like it will be.” I asked her for her reasons, and she gave some – her hastiness, lack of preparation, previous failures – and I could see that she couldn’t convince herself enough.

It seemed that the three criteria of Logic, Information and Positive Philosophical Choice didn’t support the chief assumption, but also that Sarah’s strong feelings made her believe that it was true. This combination – Thinker says True, Criteria say Untrue – leads to asking the Invitation Question (one of three possible routes).

I asked Sarah: “Given that the assumption that your work will be worse than everyone else’s and they’ll think you’re stupid is stopping you from applying yourself to finishing your exhibition, what do you

credibly need to assume in order to apply yourself and finish it?” Long, certainly, but all the important bits were Sarah’s own words, and she heard it. Our own words resonate so deeply in the brain. She asked me to repeat the question. Then she said: “I’d have to assume that my work is as good as anyone else’s and that I have enough time.”

Now we were able to create the Incisive Question. I asked Sarah: “If you knew that your work is as good as anyone else’s and you have enough time, how would you apply yourself to finishing the exhibition?”

Her face cleared. She said: “I’d ring my tutor today when I leave you, and go and see him, and get this sorted out.” Her voice strengthened: “Then I’d get my portfolio together and work out what I can use and what pieces I

“This is amazing – I really feel excited about doing this. I can’t believe it”

need to start from scratch. And then I’d look at the weeks, and slot in the time I need for each piece...” Her voice tailed off and she looked at me expectantly.

So I asked her again, changing the question to: “If you knew that your work is as good as anyone else’s and you have enough time, how else would you apply yourself to finishing?”

“I’d ask my sister to help with this – she’d do it without annoying me. And I’ll take my computer out of my room; I waste so much time on it.”

She stopped, so I asked the Incisive Question again and, after a pause, she said: “That’s enough, I think. Now I just want to ring my tutor!”

She sat quietly for a moment. Then she said: “This is amazing – I really feel excited about doing this. I can’t believe it.”

I asked Sarah if she’d like to write down her Incisive Question and make some notes for actions and she did that, quickly creating her own action plan.

Finally I offered her appreciation of a quality I had noticed during our session: I told her how much I appreciated her honesty and her wry humour.

In June, Sarah emailed to tell me that the exhibition had been a great success, that her overall result was a 2:2 – not as good as she had hoped when she started the course, but hugely better than she had feared in March.

And she added: “Something changed for me during that session – I suddenly knew I could do it.

“Isn’t it amazing how much our assumptions can hold us back?” ■

Ruth McCarthy is a Time to Think coach and consultant. She can be contacted via www.thinkitthrough.co.uk.