



Hats off To Collaboration

Edward De Bono's Six thinking hats is so overquoted and misused that it's become an educational cliché. Here's how to use it properly, says **Debra Kidd**.

I come across a lot of teachers who think they know the six thinking hats. I've sat in on training where advisors and consultants have 'taught' the thinking hats to teachers and got it wrong. Nigel Newman of the De Bono Foundation says it happens a lot - and that there are many schools in which this simple and effective technique is misconstrued and misunderstood. I've seen Thinking Hats linked to Bloom's Taxonomy - there's no connection. I've seen Thinking Hats used in classrooms where one group sits in black and another in yellow, debating an issue. It makes me want to scream: "No, no, no!"

So what are the thinking hats? Why are they useful? What is the thinking behind the thinking? And, most importantly, what is their application to the classroom?

Why do we need the Thinking Hats?

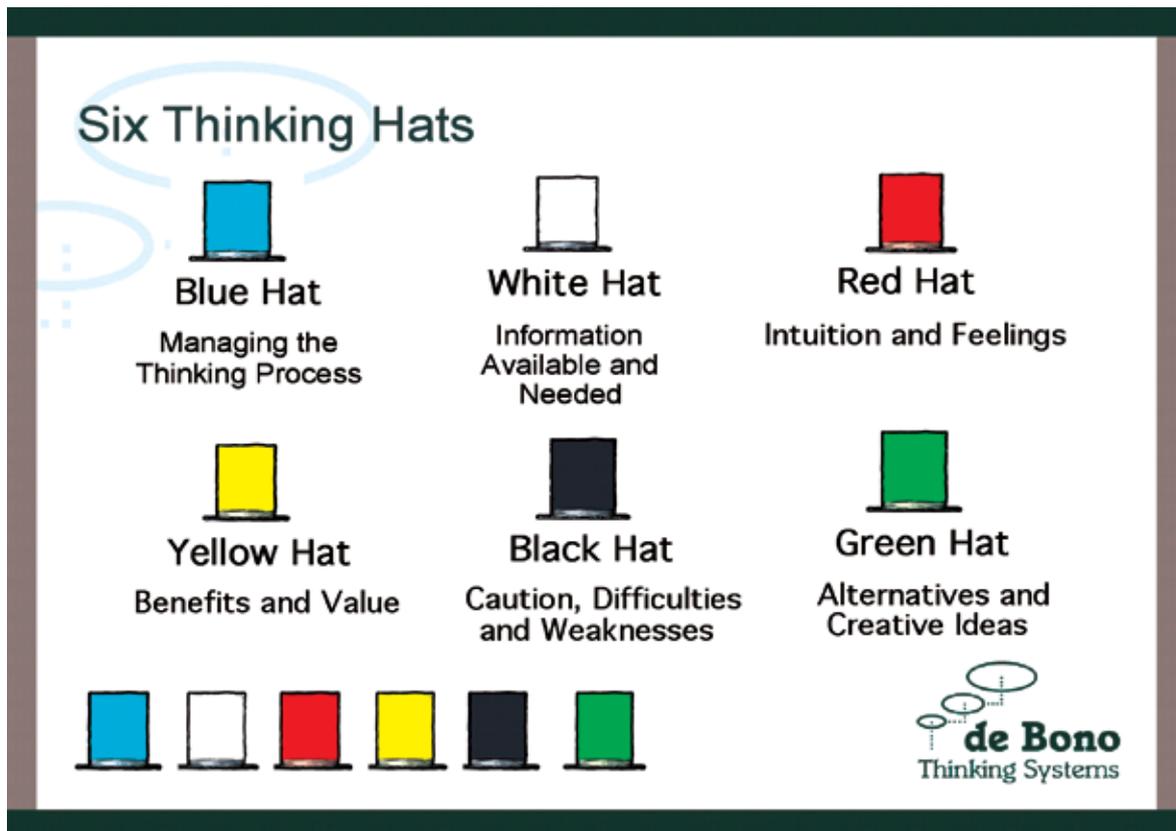
The Six Thinking Hats are lateral thinking tools devised by Edward De Bono in the 70s. They are one of several thinking tools he developed to help people to clarify their thinking and move towards a more productive and collaborative model of decision making. In his book 'The Six Thinking Hats', he explains what is wrong with the way we approach thinking and the historical reasons for this.

De Bono's concerns about the way Western societies discuss problems are mirrored in 'Metaphors We Live By', by Lakoff and Johnson. In this book, they starkly expose our flawed approaches to argument. Consider the following phrases:

- 'He shot me down'
- 'I won the point'
- 'He destroyed my argument'
- 'He fired criticism after criticism at me.'

Lakoff and Johnson highlight that our decision-making is often combative. De Bono agrees - he points to the





development of dialectic thinking, stemming from the works of Socrates, Aristotle and Plato in which detailed questioning and probing form an argument that challenges accepted thinking and norms. In a society in which the hierarchies of power are being challenged, this combative form of debate can be useful. But does it have a place in the classroom or the boardroom, where the ideal is a consensus - a consensus in which there is freedom to share ideas without fear of attack and where it is recognised that there will be many ways of looking at an issue?

The thinking hats process attempts to move discussion away from the adversarial towards the collaborative. In his book, De Bono makes great claims about the impact this approach has had on efficiency in industry – Seimens, 3D and IBM are just three international companies committed to the approach. The thinking hats process facilitated parts of the Northern Ireland peace process, and has been used in marriage counselling. So what can it do in the classroom?

The Thinking Hats training programme

This question was uppermost in my mind when I started a four-day training programme with Nigel Newman at the British De Bono Foundation based at Manchester Metropolitan University. Nigel is a 'master trainer' – but we thought of him as our Yoda.

I was there with another nine tutors from MMU. At the end of four days, we were encouraged to 'try it out'. I started with my family. Realising my husband was black

and white and I was red and green, I started to shift the way I looked at his point of view. We argued less. I understood him more.

I tried it on my class. In their evaluations, one child said: "It really helped me to organise my thinking. I think that's why we came up with so many ideas."

In fact, every time I've used it since with students, whether on seven year olds or seventeen year olds, they've all said: "It's changed the way I think."

What are the Thinking Hats?

When we think, we tend to default to modes and patterns ingrained in us. Rooted to experience and largely left to their own devices, these modes influence the way we approach our thinking. We all have the capacity to think in each of the six ways De Bono colour coded and iconised as hats, but we tend to rely very heavily on just a couple of them. These 'types' of thinking are all important and all serve their uses. They are:

Red – The emotional hat – described as 'gut instinct'. Emotions are important in driving our responses to issues. We all have them, although some people deny their place in business. People accuse each other of "Being emotional", as if it's a weakness. In fact, says De Bono, it is important to allow everyone to share their emotional reactions to an issue so they don't fester and affect their thinking in other areas of their work.

In a Thinking Hats exercise, people are asked to quickly share their emotional responses to an idea at the beginning of the project. Then they can examine later whether those early emotional or gut feelings have changed. Being able to put on and take off the red hat is crucial in developing perspective and objectivity – a crucial skill in the emotional and social development of children. If this doesn't happen, the red hat thinker remains in an emotional mode throughout the discussion – this is rarely productive.

White – The information Hat. The white hat is used when information is required. It allows the group to discover what they already know to be true. The group can then discover what gaps exist in their knowledge and can decide how to fill those gaps. It also allows the group to report, factually, other people's views. A white hat thinker can find themselves being exasperated by a red hat thinker:

Mr Red: I hate the idea.

Mrs White: Don't be ridiculous – you've not even looked at all the facts yet.

Mr Red: I don't care – I'm sick of the way these things are always pushed on us.

Mrs White: You're being too emotional about this.

Mr Red: You're so cold. You never listen to me. I'm a human being, you know, a human being.

Mrs White-Turning-Pink: Oh for heaven's sake!!

Yellow: The yellow hat is the 'benefits' hat. It looks for the good and the possible good in any given situation. Reasons must be given, but the thrust of using the yellow is that it asks for the positives. Sounds simple – but strangely, many people find the yellow hat difficult, particularly adults who have come through an education system in which they have been trained to be critical and objective.

Yellow hat thinkers get negative reactions – they can be described as "hopeless optimists" or "away with the fairies". But optimism is crucial to our survival and to progress and innovation. We need to practice this thinking mode more often.

Black: The black hat has been referred to as a 'negative' hat – this is wrong. The black hat is productive and vital, but looks specifically for the risks and advises caution in the decision making process.

This is obviously crucial in any decision making process. The government might have benefitted from a little black hat thinking when introducing League Tables into the education system. A good black hat thinker might have foreseen the impact on local house prices surrounding schools appearing 'high' in the league tables, the subsequent increasing polarisation of the classes and so on...

What happens when yellow and black join a discussion about organising an event?

Mr Red (angrily): I hate the idea.

Mr. Black (calmly): So do I.

Ms Yellow (enthusiastically): I love it – think of all the people who would come to look at our work – no-one else is doing anything like this.

Mr. Red (sarcastically): Quite!

Mrs White (warily): You've not looked at all the facts yet.

Mr Red (impatiently): I don't care – I'm sick of the way these things are always pushed on us.

Mrs White (calmly): You're being too emotional about this.

Mr Red (accusingly): You're so cold. You never listen to me. I'm a human being, you know, a human being.

Ms Yellow (soothingly): Don't get upset – I really do think there are lots of benefits.

Mr. Black (cautiously): And there are lots of problems. What about car parking?

Ms. White (thoughtfully): Hmmm yes – how much car parking would we need?

Mr. Black (dramatically): Loads and that's just the start of it – think about congestion.

Ms. Yellow (waving her hands): Think about the PR.

Mr Black (pointing his finger): This is a big mistake – we can't accommodate all those people.

Ms Yellow (shaking her head): All those people will bring in money – and raise our profile.

Mr. Black (frowning): I disagree.

Ms Yellow (frowning): Well I disagree with you.

Ms White (frowning): I think we need to call another meeting to discuss the parking issue.

Mr Red (frowning): Oh yes, another bleeding meeting. I hate meetings.

And so on. As you can see, good decisions are rarely made when all hats are allowed to talk at the same time and are unregulated.

Green: The green hat is the creative hat, characterised by statements like "What if?", "Why not try", "Wouldn't it be fun/interesting if...?". In the above conversation, Mr Green might have said: "What if we get a shuttle bus to bring people here?". The problem is that green is often drowned out – because other modes of thinking have become entrenched. Green is also often silenced by the tension in the room.

Applying the thinking hats practically

In meetings like the one above, nothing is decided and all leave feeling frustrated. The loudest get heard. Arguments are 'won' and 'lost', and wonderful ideas get lost in the fray. So how is a Thinking Hats meeting different?

In a Thinking Hats meeting the colours are worn by *everyone at the same time*. The above exchange fails because a different person wears each hat and they all clash.

Taking the hats in turn and trying them all on allows people to shift their point of view. There is no 'winning' – because you'll be contradicting your own arguments in a few minutes time as you try on a different hat. This removal of the adversarial gives quieter children time and confidence to put their points of view forward.

It is a crucial rule of the process that everyone makes a contribution to every hat. This is most easily managed by putting the children into groups. All the groups are working on the same hat at the same time - but talking in small, manageable groups. Most importantly, there is a consistency of approach, time is used effectively and there is an opportunity for everyone to try a new way of thinking - reminding the brain that there might be more ways to approach a problem than its initial default mode.

There is one final hat – the **Blue**. The Blue hat is the organiser hat – the one that sets the agenda, decides on a time limit for each hat, sums up and records the discussion and keeps order. Usually the blue hat is worn by a facilitator sitting out side of the main discussion –like the teacher. But it is also the only hat that can be worn simultaneously with another.

For example, if a child wearing the yellow hat notices a flaw in the plan, another child in the group can stop that line of thinking – and tell them to save it for black hat thinking. Getting back on track is part of the blue role - it can be put on briefly to remind a group of the task in hand.

Case study: using the Thinking Hats in an office

A fictional business is considering opening its building to public tours. Here's how the staff could use Thinking Hats to discuss the issue.

Facilitator: Let's start with some red hat thinking on this – how do you feel about it? I'll move round the room and everyone can speak briefly or gesture.

There are a variety of responses. Some say they hate it, some say great. Some shrug their shoulders. One blows a raspberry.

Facilitator: OK - we need some white hat thinking. In your groups, can you spend five minutes or so listing what we know to be true? Can someone act as a scribe for each group?

All the groups work collaboratively and produce lists of fact. Questions arise - one group wants to clarify whether the public would access all areas. There are some points of drifting – one employee, Mr Black, says there would be traffic chaos. He is reminded that the group is in White Hat mode, so his concern is recorded as a question: "What would the impact of public access be on local traffic?"

Facilitator: (takes the feedback and lists what needs to be found out, and who will do it.) Lets move on to yellow, black and green hats. What are the pros and cons?

The proposal's supporters lead the yellow hat conversation. With prompting, the others come up with statements starting with "I suppose..." or "Maybe..." A list of potential positive benefits, some of them funny, are listed.

With black hat, the people who like the idea find it difficult – but they contribute some possible areas of concern. These ideas are listed too.

The facilitator then allows ten minutes for some green hat thinking. When the group seems to be struggling for ideas, he introduces some random word techniques to spark off ideas. Hilarity arises - but there are some credible ideas offered. Summing up, the facilitator lists some tasks – mostly fact finding - and arranges a follow up meeting to pursue some of the new suggestions.

The most important thing in this example is that the discussion is harmonious, focused and target orientated. I've seen it used in primary school councils to make decisions about recycling and in sixth form colleges (see Louise Astbury's feature) in a wider creative learning project.

Case Study two: using the Thinking Hats in a secondary school

Picture this. Year eight – a pretty boisterous group in Stoke on Trent. The school is a 'Change School' - which means they are developing a new creative curriculum to try to change behaviour, partly funded by Creative Partnerships. This has allowed the school to employ a graphic designer to help the Communications Team (English and ICT) to deliver a project which links several subjects into a 'Mantle of the Expert' project. (In a 'mantle of the expert' project, students pretend to be experts in a field solving business problems. Projects like this are thought to spark children's imaginations and encourage them to come up with creative ideas.)

In this project, the students are 'employees' of a failing soft drinks company – StokaCola. Their jobs are on the line. New products are required – which need branding - to save the company. Some external consultants have been brought in to help the company but the ideas, the market profiling and the manufacture and marketing of the products is up to the employees.

When the class enter the classroom on the first day, they are initially bemused to be in role, but they soon warm up to the task. They are asked to identify where the problems lie in the current branding. The children immediately decided that the name 'StokaCola' was too regional. They found problems with the image of cheap cola – they thought it was too unhealthy.

The children then drew ideas for new products, but there was a lot of disagreement in the group. The children needed help to work more co-operatively and to organise their thinking. We decide to start the next session with some

Professional Development training - with a 'management consultant' (or me!) specialising in Six Thinking Hats.

I asked the groups to identify what their problems were. They nearly all maintained their roles and spoke in first person as if their enterprise was real. I give them an overview of Thinking Hats and explained that we were going to use the hats to decide on a new cola brand.

Even children who had taken entrenched positions the day before showed they were able to see the potential weaknesses in their ideas when doing the Hats exercise. One child who normally found it very hard to concentrate was fully focused in this task – he found it easy to switch modes of thinking quickly.

Far more ideas were generated after thinking hats training - and the ideas were followed through. The teacher said she was amazed how well the children had retained the colours. We were delighted to overhear children talking about the colours in class conversations – saying: "We need to put on a black hat here".

The Thinking Hats formed only a small part of the process. But the important thing is that it was contextualised in a

'real' context. Thinking skills are often taught in isolation. While it is necessary for the hats to be 'taught' and experienced remotely before being applied to a real problem, the reason for the training sat within the project beautifully and the pupils all found a direct relevance. One child said:

"I surprised myself. Don't talk much normally, but I have a lot of ideas like – I just daren't say 'em in case they sound stupid. But green hat lets you get em out, and we used one. I was dead proud when they chose that idea of mine."

The future

If you are interested in training, contact the De Bono Foundation. Schools who take ITT trainees from Manchester Metropolitan University are entitled to free training as part of the partnership offer.

Debra Kidd is a Senior Lecturer in education at Manchester Metropolitan university and a consultant for creativity with the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. She is also the guest editor of this issue.

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