

A Guide to Blinks

www.blinks.education

Foreword from Roy Blatchford

I am an admirer of Mark Twain's observation: 'I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead'.

As a teacher and headteacher I regularly urged others to adopt a 'less is more' approach when committing words to the page. Master storyteller Roald Dahl is the model!

And these numbers tell their own story:

- The Lord's Prayer - 54 words
- The Ten Commandments - 297 words
- The American Declaration of Independence - 300 words
- The EEC Directive for exporting duck eggs - 26,911 words

When, as one of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), it came to writing reports on schools, I became convinced that fewer, well chosen paragraphs proved more useful to school and college leaders than pages of descriptive prose.

During my time as an HMI (2004 -2006)), I led the pilot inspections of good and outstanding schools as part of the Proportionate Inspection Project (PIP). I realised then how excellent inspectors working with excellent headteachers could come to reliable judgements about provision and outcomes in a short space of time.

On its publication in 2005 I read Malcolm Gladwell's seminal book *Blink: the power of thinking without thinking*. Its central argument is that someone who is very knowledgeable in a given field of human endeavour ('10,000 hours of purposeful practice') can very readily distinguish between excellence or poor performance - in the blink of an eye. Just occasionally they get it wrong, but most often they get it right.

Over the past twenty years I have been involved in education system improvement in the UK and in different parts of the world. I have taken the spirit and philosophy of *Blink* into settings from New York to Manama, Pune to Geneva, Singapore to Southampton.

It is the same spirit and philosophy which provide the underpinning to this *Blinks* Guide.

The contents of the Guide present a shared agenda for reviewers and those hosting the *Blink*, so that there is clarity and transparency in the process. What is written here is a working draft, to be shaped and modified in action.

Further background to the thinking and practice of *Blinks* is available in [*The Restless School*](#) (John Catt, 2014), [*Success is a Journey*](#) (John Catt, 2018) and [*The A-Z of Great Classrooms*](#) (John Catt 2023).

1. A distinctive approach

- *Blinks celebrate what is good and great in a setting, identifying sharply how practice might be enhanced.*
- *Blinks offer high quality, precise and engaging feedback to teachers and support staff.*
- *Blinks value what colleagues are doing and motivate them to do even better.*
- *Blinks are an excellent contribution to any school development process.*
- *Blinks offer a distinctive approach to reviewing and reporting on education settings: nurseries, schools, colleges, university departments: a model which promotes robust, externally supported self-evaluation.*

AND.....it is all a matter of trust. It is the external reviewer's key responsibility and goal to earn the trust of those s/he is working with for just a day or two. Earning trust does not come easily; where all parties are willing and open, it is remarkable what can be established in a very short space of time.

2. Fresh eyes on familiar settings

The review/blink process aims to get to the heart of a setting, capturing students' lived experience. Central to this are the fresh sets of eyes that external, independent, experienced colleagues bring. Most of us, over time, become almost blind to our everyday surroundings. It often takes an outsider to point out an important plaque which is hanging at an angle, a notice-board with two-year old notices, or a broken paving stone as you enter the main reception area.

Importantly in classrooms, outstanding practice in one classroom or lecture theatre may almost be taken for granted by leaders and is thus not sufficiently shared with other teachers. Or tired everyday routines in another seminar room are just that - and are in need of an urgent refresh.

It is a hallmark of high performing schools and colleges that they promote the 'fresh eyes' approach as a key element in staff's professional development.

3. Do you see what I see?

One of the key skills excellent reviewers bring to their work is their ability to help those observed 'climb inside the skin of the observer'. If you are a hotel inspector, the moment you walk into assess the quality of a bedroom suite you know what you are looking for. Or you are a car mechanic and can recognise in an instant that a certain engine noise means a particular fault is in play. Or see the surgeon example in section 5 below.

Where good trust has been established between the reviewer and the host teacher/leader, debate around 'seeing things differently' can lead effectively to 'doing things differently'.

4. Great questions

Another key skill is the ability to ask great questions, with a smile. It is worth challenging orthodoxies, if only to find out why some things are orthodox. School leaders and teachers enjoy explaining why they do things the way they do; and are equally interested in listening to suggestions for different ways of doing.

Great questioning requires keen listening, quick thinking, and skilful orchestration of follow-up questions: why, how, where, when, what - the familiar litany.

5. Working with and having fun

In the essay 'The Surgeon and the Scalpel' (see p62 in [Success is a Journey](#)), I write as follows:

A few years ago I lay on a surgeon's table, under local anaesthetic, to have a neurofibroma removed from my wrist. The lead surgeon began cutting precisely, then passed over the scalpel to one of his juniors. Within just 20 seconds he seized it back, clearly not content with the direction of the incision. He at once offered both the junior and me some reassuring words.

It struck me then – it was in my early days as an HMI - that my observing a lesson was of little use to the teacher if all I did was to offer some comments once the pupils had left the classroom. I would not have wanted the surgeon to let his junior go on cutting in the wrong direction, saving the feedback to later. My wrist is too precious to me for that.

Ever since that moment under the knife, formal inspection apart, I have rarely observed a lesson without interacting in some way.

I go on to give examples of interacting with teachers and having intellectual fun with students. Of course, if the reviewer is going to be involved in this way it has to be agreed beforehand: what are the terms of engagement? what are the parameters?

Interventions need very thoughtful handling so that they in no way unsettle or undermine the teacher/tutor.

6. Empowering teachers and leaders

A key goal of the successful *Blink* process is to train colleagues to be able to carry out similar styled reviews in their own setting or in partner schools, colleges and university departments. It is undoubtedly difficult to bring 'fresh eyes' to your everyday setting, so working outside your own classroom or department is recommended.

We have trained hundreds of teachers and leaders over the past fifteen years to conduct *Blinks*. Feedback has been one of professional pleasure and real impact on school/college development and improvement.

7. Protocols

The *how* of the *Blink* is just as important as the *what*. Strong interpersonal skills are essential for the reviewer to be successful.

From the first telephone call to arrange the *Blink*, the reviewer must conduct a highly professional conversation, listening keenly and responding thoughtfully. The tone is set at this point.

The reviewer and host leader will discuss arrangements for the day/two days, the need for prior documentation or not, the agreement for interventions (see section 5 above), the opportunity for paired observations, and the nature of feedback.

8. Oral feedback and written reviews

A *Oral feedback*

At the end of a day or two-day *Blink*, a well organised feedback session is an integral part of the process. Carefully agreed with colleagues beforehand, and depending on context, the feedback can take different formats:

- To the group of teachers/lecturers whose sessions have been visited
- To a core or extended leadership team
- To a group of governors/trustees
- To a group of students and teachers
- To the Principal.

Flexibility on behalf of the reviewer is essential as s/he is serving the setting in order to help develop everyday practice. Any feedback is to achieve this improvement purpose. Once again, *how* oral feedback and ensuing discussion takes place is as important as what is communicated. Comfortable messages are easy to give. The real skill lies in giving the occasional uncomfortable message in such a way that these who are listening will act upon the advice over time.

High quality oral feedback and feed-forward should be fun, engaging and focused.

B Written reviews

There are three examples of different kinds of reviews posted on the Blinks website. The reviewer needs to agree with the host beforehand what is the audience of any written report. And several drafts may be required!

Echoing what is written above in section 1:

- *Blinks value what colleagues are doing and leave them feeling good about their practice.*
- *Blinks are an excellent contribution to any school development process.*

9. Questions to ask about classrooms – some examples

a. Year 6 Lesson Blink

1. What are your first impressions of the learning environment?

1. Is it light, airy and the right temperature for learning?
2. Does the classroom, and the areas around it, reflect the range of Y6/upper primary work? What is special, or striking, about this work?
3. Is the classroom arranged so that all children can be involved in discussions and also use their workspace to write, design and implement?
4. How do the children react to your presence as a visitor? Are they happy to talk and explain?

2. In what ways does the style of teaching and learning reflect that this is a Year 6 class and therefore distinctive in terms of the completion of the primary stage of learning.

3. How is furniture configured? Where does the teacher position her/himself?

4. To what extent do the children take control of their learning and how able are they to explore a range of learning areas? Are the children aware of what will come next in terms of their move to the secondary phase?

5. How are support staff being deployed to have a significant impact on learning?
6. What evidence can you see of Year 6's independent learning skills? If the teacher left the room, would the children continue to work on the current task?
7. Is the level of work appropriate for the more able learners and is it sufficiently demanding? Has the work been effectively scaffolded, whilst retaining an intrinsic interest/challenge, for those who have learning or personal management difficulties?
8. Is homework or other independent study/research important to the lesson? Has there been some form of lead-in and are there possibilities for extension?
9. How well does the teacher demonstrate his/her own specialist subject knowledge? Does s/he extend horizons and leave students magically wondering?
10. How creatively are book/technology resources harnessed to stimulate students' interest and extend their skills and knowledge?

b. Years 12/13 Blink

1. What are your first impressions of the learning environment?
~ does the room celebrate the specialist subject being taught?
~ does the room celebrate post-16 work?
2. In what ways does the style of teaching and learning reflect that this is a Year 12 class and not a Year 8 class?
3. In the time you are in the room, count the minutes (a) the teacher talks (b) students converse with a proper focus? Is the teacher working harder than the students?
4. What evidence can you see of Year 12's independent learning skills? If the teacher left the room, would students' focus continue? Do the students teach each other?
5. Is the level of work appropriate for more able students, irrespective of mixed-ability or setted group? If not, how would you make it more demanding?
6. How has homework led into this lesson? How is homework/further independent study/research following up the lesson?
7. What evidence is there of (a) fun (b) scholarship (c) intriguing digressions (d) teacher sharing personal enthusiasms (e) students' intellectual confidence?

8. How well does the teacher demonstrate his/her own specialist subject knowledge? Does s/he extend horizons and leave students magically wondering?
9. How creatively are book/technology resources harnessed to stimulate students' interest and extend their skills and knowledge?
10. Can you tell from looking at books/folders whether students fully understand syllabus demands ('the story of their learning')? Is there a difference in the quality of note-taking amongst students? Is 'next best step' marking well judged?

10. Coda

In the spirit of Blink, reviewers might like to ask for three points of feedback on the process they led. From the point of view of the hosts: were the outcomes of the review achieved? Did the 'less is more' style work? Did the reviewer capture the essence of the school/college?

We welcome any constructive written feedback on *Blinks* in action, to

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