

Megan

... and the art of developing thinking skills

COMPARING CLASSIFYING LOOKING FOR PATTERNS SEQUENCING
PREDICTING MAKING LINKS MAKING DECISIONS EVALUATING
REVIEWING MODELLING IMAGINING ASKING QUESTIONS ASKING OPINIONS
SUMMARISING OUTCOMES

The power of thinking skills is increasingly recognised in the development of children's learning ... and Megan Williams could be just the character you're looking for as a focus for thinking skills in the Key Stage 2 classroom.

Created by prizewinning author Frances Thomas, Megan lives in a small village on the Welsh border and appears in two novels: *Megan the Detective* and *Megan and the Pantomime Thief*.

These are mystery/detective stories with a distinctively Welsh flavour written for readers of 8+. As well as all the usual satisfactions of a well-written narrative (pace, humour – and recipes!), Megan offers an interesting study in how to use thinking skills to solve real-life problems and dilemmas.

But maybe your pupils will be able to suggest techniques and lines of enquiry that Megan has missed. Here are some extra activities, described more fully later in this article, which focus on *Megan and the Pantomime Thief*:

- KWL diagrams
- Diamond ranking
- PMI diagrams
- Fishbone diagrams
- Mind mapping
- Caterpillars
- Multi-layer mysteries

Megan is a very organised young lady. This extends to her thinking – which she often does under numbered points – committing her thoughts to paper in order to think things through. But perhaps she could produce a visual *mind map* of her thinking. Maybe this would help her to see the connections between various pieces of information. The children in your class might like to try this with both the pantomime mystery and the puzzle of the wooden carvings to see if they come up with a solution more quickly than Megan does. Alternatively she might have used a **KWL** chart to help her to ask the right questions. Recording what she already **KNOWS** might help her to ask a range of **W** questions (**WHO? WHAT? WHEN? WHY?**). Using the final part of the chart would help her to summarise what she has **LEARNED**, thereby summarising and setting the scene for the next stage in her thinking.

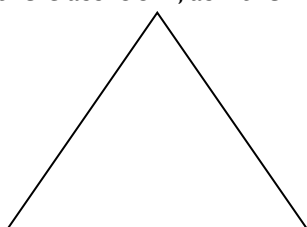
Megan isn't tunnel-visioned: cooking is her hobby and it helps her mind to relax and go on working whilst she is absorbed in doing something completely different. Megan also uses cooking as a way of persuading people to her point of view. This is a useful strategy for children (and adults) too. Recipes, of course, make perfect

sequencing activities, but are much more fun when children have actually had the chance to make them for themselves.

Megan forms hypotheses – imagining scenarios and situations – such as who might be coming to call on her detective writer dad – but she is not afraid to change her hypotheses or admit she was wrong. Neither is she afraid to ask for help. Dad is a useful source of inspiration. In the first Megan story, he taught her that criminals have to have **Means, Motive** and **Opportunity** and this is a formula that she finds very helpful.

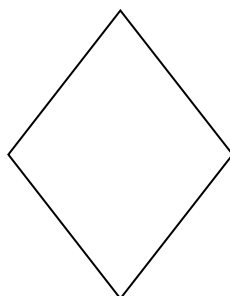
Megan is very observant. She uses the ‘**Observing Walk**’ as a focused way of gathering evidence. She also tries to visualise settings, for example when she is sitting in school thinking about the pantomime rehearsal room. She explains what deduction means: you don’t have to be on-site with a magnifying glass to work things out but you can review the evidence in your head.

The ‘**Observing Walk**’ however is a hands-on detective activity which can be conducted around the school or its grounds, especially if clues have been specially seeded. Challenge the children to keep their eyes and ears open. When they return to the classroom, ask them to brainstorm everything that they have seen or heard. A



PMI triangle or a **ranking diamond** is a useful way of putting their observations in order of importance. The PMI triangle is divided into 3 sections (**plus, minus, interesting**) and children classify their observations into these categories.

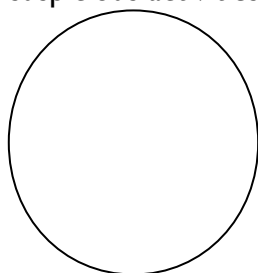
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Megan also uses the Sherlock Holmes technique of elimination. Sometimes in thinking round a set of events, she discards all the things which *didn't* happen in list form. Although she is dismayed when Mum discovers Dad’s missing book, Megan takes on board what her mum says about it being difficult to find something if it is with a number of similar things. This is why she is prepared to persist with her hypothesis about the pantomime CD and finds it, even though her initial hunch has been dismissed by the grown-ups.

Megan explains the importance of storing up little scraps of information such as when she sees the Parkers in the chemist’s shop where she had previously spotted suspicious activities. After reading a section of the story, why not try a **snowball**



activity: ask the children to work in teams of 5 with a piece of paper in the shape of a snowball. On a signal from the teacher, team members write down one significant fact or clue, cover it with a post-it, and pass the snowball to the next team member. When all 5 have had a turn, the post-its are peeled off the ‘snowball’ and the facts discussed and shared. All the snowballs can then be pooled (no doubt they will have melted in the heat of the thinking!) and discussed as a class. There will undoubtedly

be an overlap in the ideas both within and between groups.

Dad tells Megan the story of *The Invisible Man* by GK Chesterton and she realises that sometimes you have to be prepared to reconsider the same material and look at it differently. She compares this to the puzzle which, looked at one way, is two faces staring at each other; looked at another way, it is a vase or goblet. It just depends on the way you look at it. This is one reason why the statue carver manages to remain 'invisible' for so long: everybody saw him carrying out his normal duties, which gave him a legitimate reason to be all around the village. Dad's uses *The Invisible Man* to show how a postman managed to commit a crime because nobody thought it was strange when he came and went, carrying a brown sack.

Eventually Megan starts to solve the mystery of the statues when she connects the Roman numerals with the idea of a code. Even though she is not a keen code breaker, it is her tenaciousness that pays dividends – and her instinct for a solution. She is also open to hints and understands that sometimes you need to follow a hunch triggered by the most unlikely seeming clue. It's Zoe's teasing about Oliver which leads to the idea of a secret code and it's the 'hen' connection which suggests to her that this might be Welsh rather than English.

One of the things Megan does very effectively is to monitor her own thinking. She is aware that her brain does funny things and that sometimes it's important to just let it run. This is what happens when she starts playing around with the word 'hen' and realises that it has a Welsh meaning too. Her dad helps her with the anagram for which she has already assembled the coded letters from the statues. There is an opportunity for the children (with support) to do a bit of quick detective work by pausing to work out what the second word will be once the 'F' is added to the anagram: hen *orsaf*. There are opportunities here to play around with codes and anagrams. Children are probably already aware that *Torchwood* is an anagram of *Doctor Who*.

In order to show developments in their understanding as the story moves along, it will also be helpful for groups or the class to conduct a *caterpillar* activity, adding body segments as a record of each new stage in the children's thinking.

At the end of the story, Megan is cross with herself that she hasn't used classic detective methods, but Dad reassures her that unusual methods are fine so long as they work. It's an acknowledgement that different learning styles suit different people and different situations: flexibility is the most important thing.

Another technique Megan might have used is a large *fishbone diagram* or *fishbone chart* where bones branching from the spine develop the implications of the key ideas. Megan might have used Superbrat's love of putting things in the right place as a key idea in her hunt for the pantomime CD, using a bone or 'branch line' to connect CDs with the concept of tidying.

Finally the *multi-layer mystery* activity is tailor-made for a story which depends on a sequence of mysteries. Choose any mystery in the story – such as *Who or what has been depositing the carved heads?* and create a number of statement cards (as Megan herself does when she summarises what she already knows). Alternatively ask the children to create their own statement cards. The versatility of the activity is that it allows the children to physically move ideas around and create new connections, which, in turn, will generate fresh questions.

Finally, reading a story such as *Megan and the Pantomime Thief* is an excellent way of examining what the children already know about learning, which strategies they find particularly useful, and which they might try again for themselves.

And that's a pretty good learning strategy in itself!