

What Metacognition Means in Practice (Not Just Theory)

"Welcome to our first session in the Metacognition and Independent Learning series.

If you've ever attended CPD around metacognition before, you may have come away thinking...

'That sounds interesting... but what does it actually look like in my classroom tomorrow morning?'

Metacognition is one of the most researched and highest-impact approaches to improving learning, yet it's also one of the most misunderstood.

Sometimes it feels like another educational buzzword.

Today's session is about stripping away the jargon and making metacognition practical.

We'll explore what it actually looks like when pupils think about their thinking, and more importantly, what teachers can do to develop these habits every day.

By the end of today's session, my hope is that metacognition feels less like an abstract theory and more like a natural part of high-quality teaching."

Slide 2 – Safeguarding Spark

"As always, we'll begin with today's safeguarding question.

What is trafficking in safeguarding terms?

Take a minute to discuss your understanding with the person next to you."

(Pause for discussion.)

Slide 3 – Safeguarding Answer

"In safeguarding, trafficking refers to the movement of children for the purpose of exploitation.

That movement may be within the UK or across international borders.

It's important to remember that movement doesn't always involve force or physical restraint.

Children may be groomed, manipulated or coerced into situations where they're exploited.

As school staff, it's our responsibility to remain alert to concerns, understand the signs of exploitation and report concerns promptly through the school's safeguarding procedures.

Keeping children safe begins with awareness."

Slide 4 – Metacognition and Emotional Safety

"Before we begin exploring metacognition, it's worth recognising something that is sometimes overlooked.

Thinking deeply can be uncomfortable.

When pupils are encouraged to explain their reasoning, evaluate their understanding or recognise misconceptions, they may experience frustration.

That's completely normal.

Our role isn't to remove that challenge.

It's to create an environment where pupils feel safe enough to work through it.

Notice the strategies on this slide.

Stay calm.

Break thinking into smaller steps.

Model the process.

Reassure effort over outcome.

These approaches help pupils develop confidence as thinkers while maintaining emotional safety.

After all, children are much more willing to think aloud when they know mistakes are viewed as part of learning rather than something to be embarrassed about."

Slide 5 – Why This Matters

"So what exactly is metacognition?

Quite simply, it's **thinking about thinking**.

But that short definition doesn't really tell us what it looks like in practice.

That's often where the challenge begins.

Teachers understand the phrase.

They've heard the theory.

But they understandably ask,

'How do I teach it?'

Today's focus is on making metacognition visible.

Not as an extra lesson.

Not as another initiative.

But as something woven naturally into everyday teaching."

Slide 6 – What Is Metacognition?

"At the heart of metacognition are three simple stages.

Planning.

Monitoring.

Evaluating.

Before beginning a task, pupils think about how they'll approach it.

As they work, they monitor whether their strategy is helping.

Afterwards, they evaluate what worked well and what they might do differently next time.

Notice that these three stages mirror what expert learners naturally do.

Experienced adults constantly plan, monitor and evaluate without even realising it.

Our challenge is helping pupils develop those same habits consciously."

Slide 7 – The Problem with Theory Alone

"This slide captures something many teachers have experienced.

Metacognition is often over-complicated.

Over-theorised.

And under-applied.

We hear impressive terminology but sometimes struggle to translate it into classroom practice.

That's why today's session isn't really about definitions.

It's about actions.

What do teachers actually do?

What do pupils actually say?

What should we actually see happening in classrooms?

When we focus on those questions, metacognition suddenly becomes much more accessible."

Slide 8 – What It Looks Like in Practice

"So what does metacognition actually look like?

You hear pupils explaining how they reached an answer—not simply giving the answer.

You see them recognising when something doesn't make sense.

You notice them trying another strategy instead of immediately asking for help.

And after completing a task, they reflect on both the outcome and the process.

Notice that none of these behaviours happen automatically.

They've been taught.

Metacognitive classrooms are full of conversations about thinking, not just about answers."

Slide 9 – Tips for Effective Use

"So how do we help pupils develop these habits?

Firstly, we model our own thinking.

Secondly, we scaffold reflection through carefully chosen questions.

Thirdly, we ask strategic questions throughout lessons rather than only at the end.

And finally, we build routines.

That's an important word.

Metacognition becomes powerful when it becomes habitual.

Children shouldn't only think about their thinking during special activities.

It should become part of everyday learning."

Slide 10 – Model Thinking

"One of the most powerful strategies available to us is simply thinking aloud.

As experts, we often solve problems automatically.

The difficulty is that pupils can't see the invisible decisions happening inside our heads.

Thinking aloud makes those invisible processes visible.

Imagine saying:

'I'm not completely sure yet.'

'I'm choosing this strategy because...'

'That didn't work, so I'm going to try something different.'

Those simple comments demonstrate something incredibly valuable.

They show children that good learners don't always know the answer immediately.

Good learners think, adapt and persevere."

Slide 11 – Simple Metacognitive Questions

"One of the easiest ways to develop metacognition is through consistent questioning.

Notice how simple these questions are.

What's my plan?

How am I doing?

What will I change?

These questions map directly onto planning, monitoring and evaluating.

Over time, we want pupils asking themselves these questions automatically.

Eventually they become internal conversations rather than teacher prompts.

That's when metacognition becomes genuine independence."

Slide 12 – What Metacognition Is Not

"It's equally important to clear up some common misconceptions.

Metacognition isn't simply reflecting at the end of a lesson.

It isn't something reserved for high-attaining pupils.

It isn't an extra worksheet.

And it certainly isn't another separate initiative.

Instead, it's ongoing.

Embedded.

Relevant for every pupil.

It's part of excellent teaching rather than something additional.

When we model thinking, encourage reflection and ask strategic questions, we're already developing metacognition."

Slide 13 – Reflection

"I'd like you to reflect on your own classroom.

Where do pupils currently think about their thinking?

Which opportunities already exist?

And where might those opportunities become more explicit?

Perhaps you could introduce one regular thinking question.

Perhaps you could model your reasoning more often.

Or perhaps you could encourage pupils to explain not just what they did—but why they chose to do it.

Remember, small changes repeated consistently have the greatest impact."

Slide 14 – Research

"Today's session is grounded in the Education Endowment Foundation's guidance on Metacognition and Self-Regulated Learning, alongside Rosenshine's Principles of Instruction and Zimmerman's research into self-regulated learning.

Although these researchers use different terminology, they all reinforce one consistent message.

The most successful learners don't simply work harder.

They become better at understanding and regulating their own learning.

And that's something we can explicitly teach."

Closing Reflection

"I'll leave you with one final thought.

As teachers, we often spend a great deal of time thinking about what pupils should learn.

Metacognition encourages us to ask an equally important question.

How are they learning?

If pupils leave our classrooms knowing lots of facts but unable to plan, monitor or evaluate their own learning, they'll remain heavily dependent on us.

But if they leave understanding how to think through challenges, adapt strategies and reflect on their progress, we've given them something that will support them far beyond our classroom.

So I'd like to finish with one simple question:

'Tomorrow, what could I do that makes my own thinking just a little more visible to my pupils?'

Because when we make expert thinking visible, we don't simply teach children what to learn.

We teach them **how** to become successful learners themselves."

