

It's a stick-up!

There are many great memory ideas for those students struggling to make the grade as **Carolyn O'Grady** reports

For some months before their GCSEs many students at Valley Park Secondary School in Maidstone were performing an odd ritual. On their way to school they would attach items of information to situations or objects they met. The journey became a colourful and often hilarious adventure.

It was an adventure with a purpose. The aim was to learn strings of information. To internalise, for example, the seven things

characteristic of all living creatures they might first imagine meeting a friend wearing a pair of flippers (humour is important here) to remind them that all living things move; then at the corner shop they might be served by Billy Bunter to trigger the thought that living things eat etc. When they needed to collect an item from their minds, they repeated the tour and found it.

"It sounds silly, but it really worked," says student

Kiri Patey, now aged 17, still surprised that the bits of information on the circulatory system which she had attached to objects in her house including her cat and the bin, had still been there at exam time. This simple memory technique had come to Kiri courtesy of Tom Barwood, director of LikeMinds, a company which organises workshops focusing, says Barwood, "on enabling children to fulfil their potential."

The workshops were commissioned by Valley Park for their "Achievement Group", D/C borderline students who were identified in Year 11 as being able to achieve five or more A*-C grades. They are one of the school's large repertoire of revision ideas the majority of which are aimed at the borderline group.

Other ideas include one-to-one mentoring, a programme of after school sessions on revision and the

Run a similar workshop

- Find a good outside speaker, probably one recommended by other schools. Apart from the necessary skills and experience a fun personality appears to be an important factor.
- Think about the timing. If you are going to have two sessions schedule one prior to the mocks and the other about two to three months before GCSE. If only one go for the latter.
- Handle sensitively the fact that the students are from a particular group

- whether borderline or high-achieving.
- Reinforce skills learned in the workshop, for example Valley Park have incorporated Mind Mapping and thinking skills into lessons across the curriculum.
- For some students two half days rather than one whole day means they retain concentration and take more in.
- Find out if the speaker can supply resources — as these can prove to be very useful.

use of the SamLearning revision website. This has now been made available to

the whole year group, and though costly, was very successful with borderline

students when used last year. The one day or two half-day workshops focused a lot on motivation. "Where do you want to go in life?" asks Tom Barwood, emphasising the idea of revision as a stepping stone to a goal. "You're prepared to wait at the airport for hours for a holiday you've just read about in a brochure," he says. "When you're revising focus on the holiday — your goals — not on the hard work or check-in."

He then moved on to how to listen; different learning styles; Mind Map and memory techniques, including mnemonics. Finally they took a look at structuring revision and the obvious, but necessary work/reward model — ie schedule in that hour of telly or that cup of tea after

an hour of revision, not the other way round. The school decided to use an outside speaker because Tom was recommended. "But we also feel that borderline students need something that is delivered in a fun way. If it was too bookish it would turn them off," says Pam Johnson, advanced skills teacher in history.

Do other students feel left out? No, says Year 11 manager, Cathy Logan: "The others recognise that they need a different form of support," and they participated in other revision exercises, including whole year in-house revision days delivered by the teachers and a visit by the theatre in education group, Cragrats.

Of the workshop Kiri Patey, who admits that she

is very nervous of exams, says: "It gave me a feeling that I can do this — I got an immediate sense of achievement and felt more confident and determined."

"He offered so many ways of revising different things," says John Pryer, now aged 16. "Some I felt would work for me some not. Overall, I felt that the workshop and parental support were the things that made a massive difference to my results". His favourite revision idea involved reminders all over the house. Every morning he would wake up to six notes — this time real ones — in his bedroom. In every room of the house there were another set of notes. Both agreed that the novelty value inherent in having a day off, regular timetable and an outside speaker also contributed a

lot to the success of the sessions.

"You could probably get most of what was presented at the workshop out of a book, what makes a huge difference is the personality of the speaker," says Cathy Logan. Grades for the achievement group have certainly significantly improved but the effect of the workshop is impossible to separate from that of the other initiatives.

"The main contribution of the workshop was that it raised their self-esteem", says Pam Johnson. "They felt they were in with a chance".

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