

Extract from: Siraj-Blatchford, J. and MacLeod-Brudenell, I.(2005) Supporting Science, Design and Technology in the Early Years, Open University Press

### Playing the Scientist Game

It has often been assumed that the central aim of science education is to teach children as much as possible about what scientists have learnt. A similar view could be taken in design and technology where the subject would then be limited to teaching children about the products of influential schools of design, and about particular techniques and technologies. While all of these certainly have a place in science and design and technology education it is now widely agreed that the central focus of both subjects should be on the development of practical capability. Children should therefore be systematically introduced to the 'crafts skills' (Polanyi, 1958) of the scientist and those of the design technologist.

Children should therefore be introduced to these particular ways of working and particular ways of thinking and apply them to their own investigations and problems at an early stage. Just as portrait or landscape painters need to learn techniques and technicalities to practice their art effectively, and just as they will benefit from studying the paintings of others, so the scientist and the design technologist gain from similarly focused tuition in their own fields. The point is that these focused activities are not the ends in themselves, they are merely the means by which children are given their first appreciation and are later more formally introduced to each of these 'craft' communities.

As Robin Millar (1989) has suggested:

*"In teaching children science, we are helping them to internalise the procedures and standards of the scientific community. We are assisting the child to construct for herself a mental representation of the scientific ways of working and judging". (p60)*

Millar cites Lawrence Stenhouse (1978) to argue for a model of teaching in which:

*"the teacher guides the learner towards an appreciation of the standards of judgment inherent in a discipline, through a process of day-to-day correction and critical comment on the learner's work". (op cit)*

The most important personal skill for a scientist is the skill of reasoning. Or more accurately it is the skill of identifying mistaken reasoning. We can all reason incorrectly easily enough. Aristotle thought that a heavier object would fall to the ground faster than a light one. It won't, but the fact that he got it wrong doesn't mean that he was stupid, far from it. Aristotle would have been quick to correct himself if he had carried out a systematic study. Galileo is often credited as being the first to make the necessary measurements, but it is important to recognise that that was all that it took. Galileo may or may not have been the first to make the measurements, but his spectacular demonstration on the leaning tower of Pisa certainly popularised the idea. It made history! But let's take a more mundane example from a school PE lesson involving four and five year olds:

*To the tune of 'The Sorcerers Apprentice' the group of infants were jumping, feet together, around the school hall imitating 'magical brushes' that were sweeping away the water. As the children began to tire one child, Sarah, suddenly exclaimed; "Its not fair Brahmajit can jump higher because he has longer legs!" The teacher stopped the class and repeated what*

# Supporting Science Design And Technology In The Early Years

**Kathleen Armour**



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