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Engaging student voice to improve pedagogy and learning: An exploration of examples of innovative pedagogical approaches for school improvement.

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Abstract

Drawing on some recent work in schools in the UK, this paper considers some evidence that suggests that involving students in dialogue about their own learning helps young people become better learners and teachers improve their pedagogy.

There continue to be significant barriers and challenges to the development of such innovations in schools in the UK. Chief among these are the fears of teachers relating to accountability for the performance of their students in standardised tests.

However, there are many teachers who are finding and creating opportunities to develop dialogic engagement with their students, even within this context. It is from their practice that examples and illustrations are presented and some implications are drawn out for school improvement.

Introduction

This paper explores how teachers are developing their pedagogic understanding and practice through engaging their students in dialogue about learning. Experience in a number of projects in primary and secondary schools in the UK suggests that understanding of both teachers and students about learning can develop through an enquiry approach. Enquiries that engage teachers in dialogue with their students help them understand more about the learning of their students, adapt their practices and, through feedback, learn more. And so a virtuous circle is created. Teachers initially feel that there are significant barriers to this work in the UK, as they experience the pressures of a regime of accountability for performance of their students, pressures from students who also prioritise standardised tests above everything. One theme of this paper, however, is that small changes to teachers' practices can bring large benefits to both teachers and learners.

I want to introduce this topic with a story from a school visit in Canada in 2007 that illustrates to me how significant this work can be, but how easy it is for teachers to keep themselves outside the picture. The country in which this incident occurred is not significant except to indicate that it could happen anywhere. I was visiting a junior school in central Canada and a teacher was showing me some innovations in the humanities activities he had developed for his students. He had prepared a scaffolding structure to guide them, and was pleased with the students' products. I asked him what the students had to say about his innovation. He was not able to tell me, so I asked if I could speak with them. They were clear, "it's way more funner!" said one girl and they explained why. As I left the classroom the teacher asked me what they had said. I told him, but it did seem to me that it did not require the visit of a researcher from the UK for this teacher to find out from his students that his

innovations were so successful and why.

To explore the topics of this paper the research, historical and policy contexts within which some innovative practices are first described. Drawing on some of the limitations of school improvement work and of student voice activities in schools the case is made for a focus on engaging young people with their teachers in dialogue about their learning. Four practices to develop such dialogic approaches are then described, with many examples of each, before considering some of the outcomes for teachers. Limitations within the UK context are also noted. The next section explores the contexts within which the projects have been developed.

Research, Practice and Policy

The context of these pedagogic developments:

The projects, from which this paper is developed, have been undertaken in local authorities (LAs) in or near London. These are, for the most part, areas of low SES and therefore locations of significant and apparently intractable challenges of low school performance (Clarke, 2005). This has been recognised by the government in its Schools in Challenging Circumstances, Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zones, which are all government-funded programmes specifically targeting underachievement. While still subjected to the pressures of the accountability regime, the teachers in these projects have welcomed the opportunities to investigate practice within their own school, and to try out and review new practices. They are often ready to undertake this work because they perceive that the one-size-fits-all policy prescriptions (eg National Strategies) are not working effectively enough.

My role is to guide and support them in the enquiry-based projects, as a consultant from Higher Education (HE). I have worked (individually and with others) as a consultant in such projects, helping groups of teachers from different schools within an LA shape their enquiry projects, engage with the students, learn from their enquiries and ultimately to develop new pedagogy. Our projects draw together two fields of research, school improvement and student voice. The influences of these two fields are briefly described in this section.

In a recent critique of much school improvement practice my colleague Jane Reed and I (Reed and Lodge, 2006), suggested that there have been three phases in school improvement practice to date. The phases of school improvement that we identified are:

- a. an early phase ('80s and early '90s) that focused on school organisation and processes (as if improving the conditions of the school would make lessons better)
- b. a subsequent phase (early '90s until the present) that focused on teachers (as if making teaching better would improve learning without reference to the learners and their responses)
- c. a current phase (although in UK we have not emerged from 2nd phase yet) where we are beginning to see that learners need to be involved.

The first two phases, we suggest, have largely been effected without much attention to or improvement of the learning of the students. It was assumed that the improvements undertaken would produce improved learning outcomes for children, and that this would largely be identified by performance in tests. (I do not intend here to rehearse the argument that national performance tests in the UK do not do a very good job of testing children's learning. They are at best estimates of invisible human qualities

(Earl, 2004), and at worst, an end in themselves. Here, I am concerned with a more dynamic and richer form of learning, one that helps young people become better learners, throughout their lives, in other words, that generates more capacity within themselves.)

We described the third phase as current, but it is by no means dominant or even widespread. Indeed in many schools the case still needs to be made to focus on learning.

The realisation that schools that built lasting capacity for improvement came in the UK from the work of Gray et al (Gray et al., 1999), who in exploring case studies of schools over some years, identified three levels of practice, only one of which supported continued improvement. Schools that had “developed ways of being more specific about precisely how they wished to improve pupils’ learning, were able to draw on colleagues experiences to formulate strategies and had found ways of helping colleagues to evaluate and learn from their own and other teachers’ classroom experiences” (p146). The important insights from this research about teachers’ focus on pupils’ learning were taken up in the projects in which we engaged from the late ‘90s onwards. At this time the national policy emphasis for school improvement activities was firmly on the teaching, driven by OFSTED inspections, the National Strategies and the introduction of Performance Management. In policy terms this is still the case, and this remains a countervailing factor within schools.

Our thinking about research and practice in school improvement then, led us to conclude that a focus on learning is omitted from much school improvement activity. Our projects sought to correct this. A similar process has occurred in the field of student voice. It is clear that students as well as their learning has been omitted from much school development.

The history of education reform is a history of doing things to other people, supposedly for their own good. ...Even though all the participants in education will say that schools exist *for* students, students are still treated almost entirely as objects of reform (Levin, 2000) (p155).

There is a substantial and still increasing research literature concerned with engaging student voice, across Nordic and Anglophone countries, much of this has been linked to working with aboriginal and other disempowered young people. This should not surprise us as engaging student voice is a political issue, and those that undertake student voice activities in schools have to adjust to different relationships between adults and young people.

There are some very tame, reductive, and exploitative notions of student voice in the UK. Student voice is often interpreted in a very limited (or tokenistic way – see (Hart, 1997): for example it may refer only to School Council – which usually only involve a small number of elected students. Here there may be additional limitations, for example in what they discuss: toilets, lockers, meals and uniform. Here is an example from an inner city school:

We wanted to talk about changing school uniform, you know, wearing sweatshirts instead of blazers, trainers instead of shoes. Mr Robinson [teacher i/c School Council] said no, the head didn’t want it discussed and we had to talk about litter instead. (Y9 School Council Member.) Helen Ryan MA assignment 2005

I am not suggesting that toilets, food, what you carry and what you wear are not important everyday matters, indeed they are closely implicated in young people’s well-being and self-esteem. But to focus only on the school environment means that

young people are not involved in considering the central purpose of schools – student learning. Recent research revealed that in the UK although nearly 99% schools now have school councils, only 12% of these pay attention to teaching and learning. A close look at the evidence reveals that 7% of pupils said that in their school students helped select teachers and 7% said they were involved in giving feedback to teachers on lessons. So, according to the pupils surveyed, the focus represented as teaching and learning of councils is still mainly on teachers and teaching (Whitty and Wisby, 2007).

Power over students' participation is exercised through who is allowed to speak, who listens, and what is allowed to be said, and how it can be said. The focus of student voice is also often not about learning. When we consider some of the issues of power and purpose it can be seen that student voice is often distorted. In my work (*From Hearing Voices*) (Lodge, 2005) I have suggested four categories of student participation, and while there are issues with each, my argument is that dialogue is the only form of student voice that allows for the presence and participation of young people. I will briefly consider each of the four categories in turn.

1. Quality control

This form of student voice includes such practices as simple satisfaction surveys (eg 78.9% of our students said they were mostly happy with their lessons). This tells us nothing about the 21% who weren't, or what aspects were or were not satisfactory. Students are often led to expecting changes which do not occur and they are disappointed and less inclined to take any trouble over subsequent surveys.

2. Source of information

When students are invited to provide information for their teachers there is the potential for more productive participation, but again students frequently are not involved beyond giving the initial information and given no feedback on the overall picture or any consequent actions.

3. Compliance and control and surveillance

In this form students are used as agents for others: for example, OFSTED surveys that result in teachers being criticised, training students to give teachers feedback on observed lessons, using student voice to promote compliant teachers, or to promote compliant students (as in, "your school council decided on the uniform so you should be happy with it").

4. Dialogue

Dialogue requires participants to be engaged in dynamic talk that builds on the ideas and perspectives of all. It requires openness to differences and to considering alternatives. The outcomes include changes in understanding that could not have been arrived at by participants individually. Elsewhere we have described it as a process in co-construction (Carnell and Lodge, 2002a). The skills required for dialogue have to be learned by both adults and young people, and are best learned by engaging in the process. The focus of the dialogue needs to be on learning if learning is to improve and learners get better at it.

The next section considers participation by students and especially dialogue between learners and teachers with a focus on their learning.

Linking student participation and the focus on learning through dialogue:

The practices that are the subject of this paper, of involving students in the

development of teachers' pedagogy have been a recent development, and arise from an understanding that too much school improvement practice has neglected the student voice, and neglected to focus on learning. Too often when schools have called on student voice they have neglected to address issues of students' learning. In our projects we have linked these so that teacher and student dialogue about learning is at the heart of the activities.

The projects start from the premise that students need to be actively involved in understanding their own learning, in other words in developing metacognitive aspects of their learning, sometimes referred to as *meta-learning* (Watkins et al., 2002). Teachers have a significant role to play in promoting students' meta-learning. To do this, teachers need to actively engaged students in dialogue about learning.

To explain this further I want to draw on two frameworks that we have used very successfully with teachers. The first describes some of features of effective learners.

Effective learners are
Active
Collaborative
Self directed
Able to make connections between their learning and their lives
Metacognitive, that is knowledgeable about their own learning and able to plan, monitor and review.

Table 1. Effective Learners. (Adapted from Watkins et al., 2002)

These features, or at least the first three have been well known since Dewey's time. Activity and collaboration in learning, alongside students taking responsibility for their learning, being less dependent upon the teacher, have been promoted as features of good learning in teachers' training for half a century or more. Additionally, young people often report that they enjoy and learn well when they are enabled to learn actively, with others and with some agency or choice over what they do. Young people report that learning in school has little relevance to their lives (Carnell, 2004) and research into effective learning suggests that meaningful, relevant and authentic learning is more motivating. The fifth feature, meta-cognition, has recently been emphasised as an important aspect of effective learning. For example, Ertmer and Newby claim that the expert learner demonstrates the following capabilities:

- They self-regulate: plan, monitor and evaluate;
- They are reflective. This enables them to see themselves as actors with alternatives;
- They have developed meta-cognitive knowledge through practice and feedback. (Ertmer and Newby, 1996)

An influential report, called *How People Learn* from the National Research Council (US), suggests that teachers help youngsters to learn when they do three things:

- Engage with where learner is.
- Develop learners' deep knowledge, facts and structures or theories for organising knowledge

- Promote a “metacognitive” approach to instruction by defining learning goals and monitoring progress. (Donovan et al., 1999),

Other research supports the significance of meta-cognition in developing learners’ capacity to learn in today’s context (see Watkins et al., 2002). They emphasise the need for learners to become better learners, not merely more learned.

The second framework I use contains four classroom activities that develop learning about learning (Watkins, 2001).

1. Notice learning
2. Talk about learning
3. Reflect on learning
4. Learn about learning

The examples in the next section of the paper will draw on this second framework. Here it is worth noting that the first three activities are not difficult to organise in classrooms. Indeed, it is not hard to get young people to notice when they are learning, what helps or impedes them, the activities that support learning, the contexts in which they learn, what they do when they get stuck and so forth. And as soon as young people begin to notice learning, they talk about it with each other and with the teacher. It is another small step to get them to reflect on their learning, to help them see themselves as actors with a range of strategies who can influence their own learning (see Ertmer & Newby, 1996 referred to above). However, helping them learn more about learning from these three activities requires deliberate and explicit action, we have found in our projects. Talk with teachers and with peers is an essential part of the fourth activity.

Talk, and particularly dialogue, is a key process for developing meta-cognitive abilities related to learning. Indeed, both young people and adults find that dialogue helps them to learn more about the learning. Learners become better learners. Teachers understand the learning of their pupils in new ways and change their pedagogy as a result.

Examples of classroom activities to engage students in a focus on learning

In looking at what teachers are doing to develop their pedagogy, I want to draw simultaneously on two main sources of work with teachers; first their enquiry projects, and second the innovative practices they have undertaken as a result. In the field these are indistinguishable, as innovative practices themselves become the focus of enquiries. I have also used some projects undertaken by teachers as part of their MA studies.

I present them as examples of the four activities noted above as a framework used with teachers to develop learning (Watkins, 2001):

1. Noticing learning

Helping young people to notice their learning sometimes feels a little awkward to teachers when it involves interrupting young people’s focus on classroom activities. But noticing learning can happen in more subtle ways, as for example when a class is asked to think about how they worked out some numeracy problem. It is harder to do this where the dominant view in the classroom is that the important thing is to solve the problem correctly (“getting it right”) or to complete the task.

Some activities that teachers in the projects have used to help young people notice their learning can involve photographs. 6 year-old children were asked to take photos of anything they noticed about learning with disposable cameras over about three weeks. A different use of photographs involved early years teachers using a record of previous best work in order to help young people notice their own learning.

Noticing learning can also happen, not just in the moment, but in a contemplative (even reflective) manner, for example by drawing learning. A research project I undertook (Lodge, 2007) found that children of 5-6 years old showed how they saw their relationships to the teacher and to other pupils, and the dominance of behavioural concerns in their understanding about learning in classrooms.

Another example of a youngster noticing how he had learned is drawn from a teacher's account of asking her class of 10 year olds to write in their reflective journals about learning outside of school.

When I was learning to skateboard I kept doing small things again and again, until I really got them, and just looking at other people doing stuff and seeing what worked for them made me choose the next trick that I wanted to learn. There wasn't anyone telling me I should do this or that next, I just did what I thought was cool, and talk about my difficulties to friends, asking them what they thought about moves and things. I think that is really important to my learning – choosing the time to do something and choosing the way to do it. And being interested in the whole thing, I guess (KS2 male pupil). (Williams, 2002)

He noticed three things that helped him to learn to skateboard: practice, observation and talking with fellow learners. His thoughts about learning are not the obvious ones of practice more, observe more and talk with fellow learners more. Rather, he records another insight that this activity generated – that is, the importance of his choice of time and method and the value of being interested in your subject.

2. Talking about learning

Noticing leads easily into **talk** about learning.

a. “When will learning stop for you?”

Here is a nice example of the power of talk. The class teacher asked the 6-7 year olds to think about when learning would stop for them.

“Three o'clock, Miss,” they said, referring to the end of the school day. After being prompted to think a little further they then suggested

“When we are eleven, Miss”. This is the age they leave primary school. But some pupils remembered that after primary school they go to “Big School” so they decided that when they were sixteen they would leave Big School and stop learning. But the talk led to some other thoughts among the students, helped by introducing the voices and experiences of others.

“My Dad coaches our football team, and he says he learns something new every day,” offered one.

Some remembered that they had young adult family members who attend college. It then became clear that some children thought that you only went to college if you were a bit slow and needed time to catch up. But then they remembered that their own teacher went to college every week to learn signing for her work with the deaf children in the school.

As a result of the talk about stopping learning, the teacher had found that many

children had very narrow views about learning over time and place, and many of the children had been challenged by their peers to rethink such views about learning.

b. Classroom activities involving talk about learning

In our work we have found that children may need help in the early stages of talk about learning, they need to practice the language (especially the verbs). Teachers use vocabulary lists, prompts, talk partners and groups. They notice that they quickly get the hang of it with this help. Some teachers use collaborative activities such as paired and group work and jigsaw activities to ensure talk in the classroom, and to ensure talk not just about the content of the learning but also the process.

Teachers often report that the first time they try to get the children to talk they find it does not come easily, but young people of all ages quickly develop the necessary skills.

c. Learned helplessness

Here is an example where talking with a friend helped one boy understand more about what he had been doing, and what he could do differently.

I can now see that I often avoid working hard because think that if I don't do well, or if I fail an exam, I can sort of blame it on the fact that I didn't work. If I worked hard then I thought it would be really devastating if I failed but when I talked it through with John and Mark, I saw that they had that fear too – we actually decided it wouldn't be the end of the world, in fact we would probably do better if we worked hard, not worse. (KS3 male pupil)
(Williams, 2002).

This boy is almost a textbook case of what Dweck has called learned helplessness (Dweck, 2000) and since he has learned helplessness it can be unlearned. Talk with Mark helped him find another way of thinking about his learning.

Here I need to mention three lessons for teachers about talk that have been learned in this work.

First, when the topic is learning teachers will quickly and easily default to talking about teaching. Keeping the focus on learning is hard and often needs prompting, which is something that consultants do in the projects.

Second, the language used with young people is very important. Marshall's research which showed that framing learning as work and as a series of tasks encourages learners to focus on completion of tasks. Framing classroom activities as learning activities encourages a different view (Marshall, 1994). We have encouraged teachers to use learning rather than work when they mean learning, to refer to home-learning instead of homework, learning tasks instead of work, and to talk about what they learned, rather than what they did. The change from the familiar helps to focus on learning.

Third, some forms of talk are not helpful. Young people find it less helpful to talk categorically (for example, what kind of learner are you?) than to use narrational forms (what did you do when you learned this?) (Bruner, 1985) (Lodge, 2003). The skateboarding example (above) uses narrational form. An example of students talking about their experiences of categoric talk about learning styles follows below.

3. Reflection.

Reflection on learning follows easily from talking about learning, but again young

people can be helped through structures such as questions, prompts, writing and paired talk. Reflection requires developing some distance from oneself, being able to see oneself as a learner, and to explore aspects of that learning. For some writers (eg Ertmer & Newby, 1996, see above) reflection is a key learning strategy to promote richer learning. Here are some examples from classrooms in secondary and primary schools.

a. journals

One teacher wanted to find out how reflection assisted her students in learning more about their own learning. She gave them journals and encouraged them to write about learning in these following class discussions on specific topics. The examples of the young man learning about skateboarding and the boy who described how he avoided working hard both came from this activity.

b. photography

In two primary schools I have used photography to help young people reflect on learning. In one school I left some disposable cameras with the children asking them to take pictures of anything to do with learning. The conversations that arose from this activity, according to their teacher, were very productive. It stimulated the 3-4 year-old to ask each other “what’s that got to do with learning?”, “do we learn in PE [physical education]?” “do we learn in Golden Time¹?” and do we learn in Assembly?”

In another school the children used digital cameras to take photographs and produce displays about what helped their learning. Again it was the associated activities that especially prompted reflection: the brainstorm of items that help their learning; deciding which photographs to take, writing captions for them, presenting them.



¹ In many UK primary schools children have Golden Time at the end of the week when they can choose activities such as games, art and so forth. Minutes are deducted from a child’s Golden Time if the misbehave in the week.

Figure 1. Painters Ash Primary School *What helps my learning* display.

c. Assessment practices

Other teachers have been developing reflection through Assessment for Learning (AfL) activities, and especially through self-assessment. When young people have to assess their own learning they have to consider criteria and strategies and to relate present practise to future practice. An example of the development of metacognitive thinking using AfL is presented below.

d. mentoring and learning conversations

Conversations that focus on learning can also be very helpful to young people in reflecting on their learning. This is what one girl, from a secondary school, said about her experiences of mentoring.

When I started being mentored I thought this was rubbish. Now I want to see my mentor more. I think it's good but very hard to keep thinking on about how I can improve. Laura, London secondary school Y9

4. Learning about learning (or meta-learning)

Classroom practices can easily be adapted by teachers to absorb the first three practices (noticing, talking about and reflecting on learning). It is something of a stretch for some teachers to include the fourth practice: learning about learning. In some schools they have introduced learning to learn lessons (L2L as they are sometimes called) but it is likely that they are not effective when separated from the content.

Again, teachers can assist learning about learning by structuring some activities, questions and prompts to help students draw out their learning. When they reflect on how they learn they can provide teachers with some important information. But more importantly they are developing skills of becoming less dependant upon their teachers, more self-aware.

Again, drawing can be a helpful way in. In the following example the class of 9-10 year olds had been asked to draw the contrast between lessons structured by the TASC (Thinking Actively in a Social Context) wheel (Wallace et al., 2004) and other lessons. The wheel is a planning device that highlights a series of specific processes that encourage collaboration, responsibility and awareness of learning. The teacher, Emma Brown wanted to know how the children experienced lessons with and without the framework of the TASC wheel. The wheel is indicated on the wall on the left-hand side of the first drawing.



Figure 2. History lesson by Y4 in Shears Green School

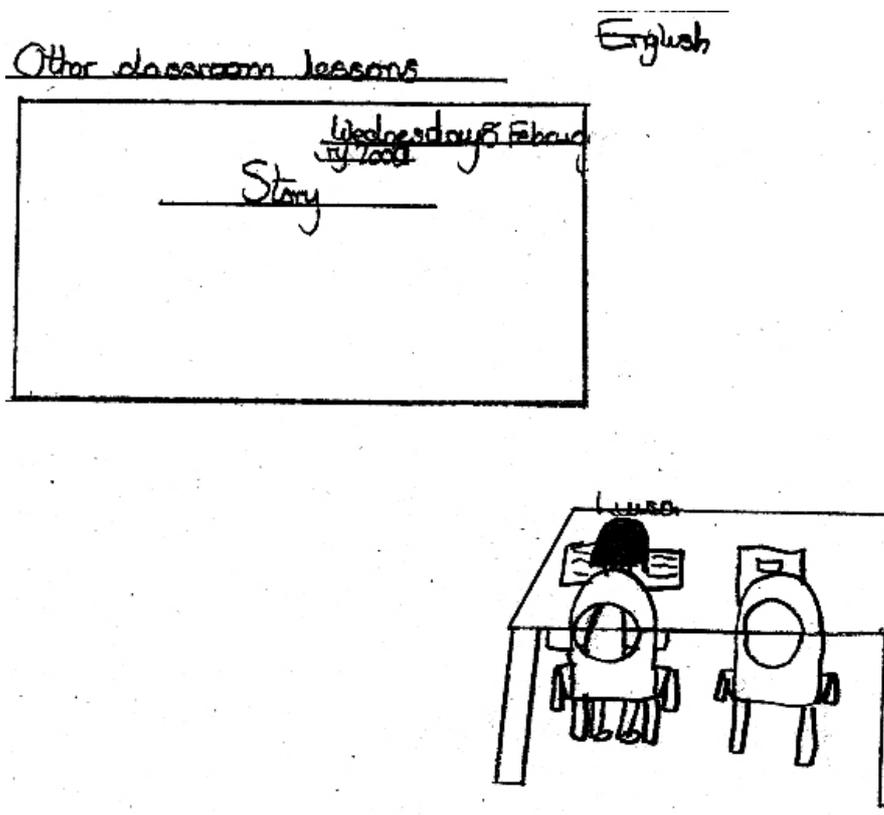


Figure 3. English lesson by Y4 in Shears Green School

In the drawing of the History lesson (figure 2) the children are making decision about their own activities. They are smiling. They occupy the central place in the picture. They have a range of materials available on the table. Under the TASC wheel a chair and other furniture are tucked out of the way. In the English lesson (figure 3), by contrast, only one child is shown, neatly tucked away at the table with her back to the viewer. The only resources are the book in front of her and the white board with the date and Story written on it. There is much blank space in the drawing of this lesson. In this pair of drawings the pupil has clearly shown a more active and collaborative engagement in the History lesson. The contrasts in other drawings by the same class

reinforced this contrast and helped their teacher understand more about their responses to being more explicit about learning processes (Watkins et al., 2007).

The next example comes from my research and demonstrates young people's insights into their own learning. These four 14 year-olds had been talking with me about the questions that teachers sometimes ask them, which they had described as "so basic you just couldn't answer them". Linda went on to give an example, which neatly challenges common ideas about learning styles.

Linda When they ask you about what style of learning you prefer - do you like to listen better or do you learn visually – and you don't think about that every day. You don't think when you are in an English lesson, "oh I'm listening", auditory –

John - that's how I learn.

Linda - and then you are expected to just tell the teacher, "Oh I learn by listening" and you don't know, you don't think about it.

Jamie You use all of them. It depends on the lesson. It's like a music lesson, you're going to listen aren't you?

Linda Art lesson you're going to look.

Jane Or if you're given a film to watch in English you're going to watch it aren't you?

Jamie You're not going to listen to the numbers in a maths lesson.
[laughter]

Linda What are they trying to tell me? (Y10 students) (Lodge, 2001).

In this example the students are clear that the teachers who ask these questions have not understood what these youngsters know about learning styles. First that learners need a variety of approaches (you use them all) and second that context is everything (it depends on the lesson).

The third example comes from an MA student, Paul Campbell, who was exploring with Y6 (10 – 11 year-olds) students use of talk in developing mathematical language specifically linked to AfL, using learning objectives and success criteria. They talked about some maths problems, they noted and recorded the processes they used to solve the problems, and then reflected on what had been learned. Together, teacher and students, came to these four conclusions:

1. Early talk to clarify helps with the learning.
2. Explaining your thinking helps to involve everyone.
3. Trying out ideas and saying what you think about them mean that together you can make them better.
4. Writing success criteria at the start helps you to know if you have got it right in the end. It can help if you get stuck (Campbell, 2007).

It will be clear from these examples that the four practices of noticing, talking about, reflecting on and learning about learning are not discrete activities. Teachers find that one practice quickly leads to or involves another. The projects in which I have worked have deliberately set out to help teachers find the moments to encourage these four activities, to build them into their planning and then to review and evaluate them. Many of the new practices begin as very small scale shifts in classroom activities: allowing a little more choice, spending five minutes reviewing how the learning went

(rather than what was learned), for example. One teacher aptly described the relationship between the shift and the outcome as “a Trojan mouse”.

Teachers and schools pretty soon find themselves questioning their curriculum (eg in secondary schools working towards more cross-curricular work), their assessment practices and even find themselves doing less planning as their students develop more power to direct themselves.

Outcomes

The processes outlined above help teachers understand more about the learning of their students. The affects of these activities enhance the capacity for the students’ learning at the same time. For me that is their main purpose, but here I am referring to the effects on teachers, and what they do in the classroom. The effects on teachers, and students, are often immediate and usually positive. The two words that we hear most frequently from the teachers are enthusiasm and excitement.

Ann Pilmour, a teacher-researcher, having looked into why Year 5 children in her school did not like science, and having tried some meta-learning strategies reported,

The changes never taxed me, in fact, I felt the joy and exhilaration of a new teacher who encounters many fresh experiences without ever feeling like a novice.

I am now a committed learner. (Carnell and Lodge, 2002b) p67.

The teachers referred to in this paper are learning innovative practices (eg jigsaw activities, using journals with their students), receiving student feedback, noticing what happens when new practices are introduced, developing new perspectives on the curriculum and on learning activities and becoming involved in curriculum innovation that is often cross-curricular. Increasingly they are challenging their own and colleagues’ assumptions about learning, based on evidence that they are collecting in their classrooms. They are developing enhanced skills of enquiry, and are doing this while supported by colleagues in what are increasingly being called Professional Learning Communities. They are finding that school processes are becoming more learning centred, including planning, review, professional development events, resource allocation.

They are also reporting that they have improved relationships with students, and observing less misbehaviour, more trust, more joint enquiry by their students. They report increased capacity to talk about learning and improved affiliation to learning by young people

The UK context for these developments

However, before I get too enthusiastic, I need to acknowledge the challenge that teachers always raise when they are introduced to this kind of work: it is against the grain. While policy prescription is loosening its grip in the UK, there are many features of the education system that remain that work against a learning-oriented approach in schools. These features include

- a continuing focus on public evaluation of schools through test scores, and OfSTED inspections;
- a continuing focus on judgements about teachers, including through performance management and test outcomes, that results in defensive teaching

(McNeil, 2000);

- a continuing focus on the teacher in classrooms that contributes to dependency by learners on teachers;
- persistent ideas about learning –populist ideas as well as teachers’ persistent practice of transmission models; this leads to a focus on individual, passive and dependent learning with little meta-learning (Watkins et al., 2007), and a focus on task completion (Marshall, 1994);
- fears by teachers that innovation will prevent them from covering the prescribed curriculum, and dependence on the National Curriculum and associated documentation;
- national and prescribed curriculum that takes little account of student interests (Carnell, 2004), conditions of learning (Rudduck et al., 1996) does not encourage engagement with what students already know and what they want to know, and their natural curiosity (See the first of three activities that teachers need to do to assist learners, (Donovan et al., 1999);
- continuous innovation contributing to teachers’ cynicism; and
- teachers’ fears of changing power relationships in classroom.

Conclusions

The implications for school improvement, of the kind of approaches described in this paper, are far-reaching. At school level, school leaders need to promote and support teacher activities based on inquiries involving young people -enquiries that start with teachers’ concerns.

Research into schools which have encouraged the pedagogical innovations described here embrace beliefs about learning and learning activities that are favourable to student participation (Askew et al., 2008). This confirms that every teacher can help young people become better learners within their classrooms, and that this can start with small changes.

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