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School Leadership

Learning Texts

The National College for School Leadership is keenly aware that school leaders want up-to-date information about learning, teaching and classrooms. This publication responds to those needs by providing a review of the latest thinking about classroom learning.

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Learning and Leading
Chris Watkins[1]

Are we talking about learning?

The term 'leading learning' is heard frequently, but as with uses of the term 'learning' it may hide many meanings, often unexamined yet often questionable. Many current uses of the term learning are not about learning at all, and those who intend to lead learning will be better placed if it really is learning they are talking about. Three major themes hijack discussions about learning: teaching, performance and work.

Phrases such as 'teaching and learning policies' and 'teaching and learning strategies' are often used, but they might better read 'teaching and teaching', since the real attention given to learning is minimal. This applies to an increasing number of publications and initiatives: *Learning Journey* (DfES, 2002) describes at length subjects and tests (ie what is now known as curriculum) but does not mention learning. *Transforming Learning* (Hay McBer, 2001) has a catchy title, but actually focuses on improving teacher–pupil communication about classrooms. Many texts on accelerated learning are predominantly teaching practices, which may be of value but do not focus on the process of learning.

Performance is not learning, though it may develop from learning. Politicians and policy-makers currently choose to limit their focus to tangible and measurable outcomes: performance tables, performance pay, performance management. With this focus comes pressure to perform better. A major risk is that teachers under pressure just pass pressure on to pupils: we've been given targets so I'm going to give you targets. Many research studies demonstrate that a focus on performance can depress performance – whereas a focus on learning can enhance performance[2].

'Work' is the dominant discourse of classroom life: 'get on with your work', 'homework', 'schemes of work', 'have you finished your work?'. At worst it can lead to work for work's sake, without considering the learning quality or engagement. Interestingly, this particular distortion is relatively easy to challenge – and productive energy is released as a result.

When teachers agree with their classes that every time they seem about to use the word 'work', they will try the word 'learning' instead, electric results are often reported.

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Which version of learning are we talking about – and leading?

On those occasions when we do manage to put on one side the discourses which divert our focus from learning, we meet another issue which is crucial: there are different conceptions of learning, each of which carries different assumptions and implications.

1. Instruction

The most dominant conception of learning relates quickly back to teaching. When asking people about their learning experiences, they mostly report occasions of being taught, and focus on what the teacher (or equivalent person) did. This reflects deep-seated cultural beliefs about learning and teaching[3]:

- teaching is telling

- learning is listening

- knowledge is subject matter taught by teachers and found in books

A further belief associated with this view is that learners acquire new knowledge in predictable and manageable stages. This belief purports to offer a clear specification of just what it is that is to be learned and, equally questionable, it suggests standards for assessing its achievement. More than any other discourse about learning, this one has spawned objectives and testing in their many guises[4]. In recent decades this conception has been made more dominant by policy-makers with short timescales, curriculum prescriptions of the style seen in the English national curriculum "Pupils will be taught that …", and so on.

The hazard which is associated with the instruction view is that of leaving the learner out of the picture, or of viewing them as passive recipients, and of viewing teaching as transmission. If teaching is telling then it follows that teachers are centrally responsible for learners' performance: this is shown to generate more controlling behaviour on the part of teachers[5].
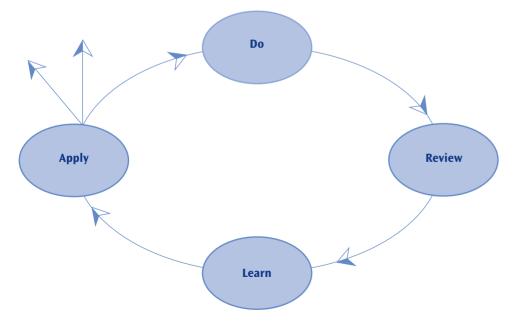
Leaders who see learning from this perspective are likely to:

- focus on teachers more than learners, especially their knowledge and competences

- view the process of curriculum as one of delivering a body of knowledge

- value tangible products which are deemed to be easily measurable

- favour modes of assessment which are timed, summative performances, often through paper and pencil methods

- seek to improve performance by accelerating the pace at which learners get "it" into their heads

- drive improvement through measurable indicators of product

- talk about learning in ways that conflate learning with teaching and performance

- de-emphasise the social dimensions and social outcomes of learning

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2. Construction

Research of the past three decades has brought attention to the processes of the learner in making sense of their experiences, relating them to past experiences and taking learning forward into their future. This view embraces the idea that the learner brings to any new experience their existing understandings and conceptions, so that learning is a process of adaptation based on and constantly modified by their experience of the world. The focus on the individual learner highlights how he or she approaches learning and engages in his or her own sense-making. In this view knowledge is constructed (even when another is transmitting), and the role of anyone helping (teaching) is examined in terms of how it helps the learner make their own sense. The process of learning from experience is often modelled in a cycle:
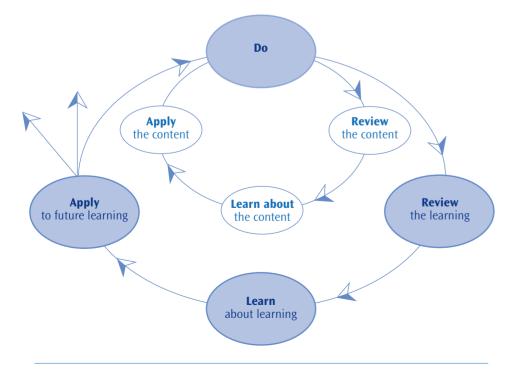

This highlights an active process, influenced by the use learning is put to. How the learning informs action in future situations is vital. Many studies of learners' approaches to achievement-related activities find two orientations, which many teachers recognise – in their pupils and in themselves.

Learning orientation	Performance orientation
Belief that effort can generate success	Belief that ability leads to success
Belief in one's ability to improve	Concern to be judged as able, to perform and learn
Preference for challenging tasks	Satisfaction from doing better than others
Emphasis on personal definition	Emphasis on competition public evaluation of success at difficult tasks
Problem-solving and self-instruction when engaged in task	Helplessness: evaluate self negatively when task is difficult
Concern for *improving* one's competence	Concern for *proving* one's competence

The performance orientation[6] is associated with negative effects for learners: they are more likely to say "I'm no good at X", they seek help less, use fewer strategies and less effective strategies, show a greater focus on marks and grades – and they display worse performance.

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The learning orientation is shown by learners offering rich commentaries on their processes as they are engaged in them. Such learners have come to plan, monitor, reflect on and understand the individual and social processes necessary to be effective learners. This is not just acquisition of particular strategies, but the monitoring and reviewing of learning to see whether strategies are effective[7]. This has been described as 'metalearning' or learning about learning, and effective learning includes this extra crucial ingredient. It is supported through a cumulative process of noticing aspects of learning, developing conversations about learning, reflecting on learning, making learning an object of learning. This can be modelled as an extra cycle.

The purpose here is to enrich the learner's view of learning (not the learner's categorisation of themselves as a learner) Metalearning promotes the versatile learner. A hazard sometimes associated with the construction view is that it may focus on the individual rather than the social processes in which a learner is engaged: in that most complex social environment, the classroom, this point is vital.

Leaders who see learning from this perspective are likely to:

- focus on the way people make sense of their experiences
- view curriculum as addressing thought-demanding questions
- value processes which make learning a visible, central element: making reasoning public, thinking aloud together
- favour modes of assessment which ask people to explain to one another, give a reflective commentary
- seek to improve learning by slowing down the pace and focusing on quality of thinking
- drive improvement through indicators of quality learning experiences
- talk publicly about learning, and promote inquiry into learning
- support learning exchanges and peer teaching
- promote people known as learners[8]
- ask of every policy and every procedure: "What do we learn from this?"
- encourage others to do the above

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3. Co-construction

The third stance on learning recognises that human behaviour is necessarily social. The crucial role of language and dialogue in the creation and negotiation of shared meaning is emphasised. Culture is considered, since humans are surrounded by the cultural objects in which meaning has been vested by previous generations. In this view, knowledge is constructed socially rather than individually. It is not in books (the idea being to get it from there into heads), knowledge is in what people create when they go to those books. Similarly it is not in heads (the idea being to get it from brainy heads), knowledge is in what people create when they get their heads together[9]. Action is crucial: when people are doing things together, knowledge is created and recreated in their discourse. Context is crucial: studies of learning out of school highlight the potency of viewing people as a knowledge-creating organisation, especially for fast-moving industries in what has become characterised as a 'knowledge explosion'.

Nevertheless this view also highlights how traditional bodies of knowledge are constructed and maintained, largely through the ongoing communications of a community which has proposed ways of agreeing, even though different views remain.

For the teacher this view focuses attention on the processes by which learning communities are built. For example, in a classroom participants work to create new and shared knowledge on an agreed topic through collaborative argumentation and knowledge-testing. This resembles authentic and generative learning in the domain under study[10]. Teaching strives to create conditions for learner participation: supporting a learner helps them grasp the whole system to be learned, rather than reducing it to components for bottom-up acquisition.

The co-construction stance moves us from viewing learning as an individual acquisition, whatever the commodity to be acquired, to viewing learning as also becoming part of a community[11]. A hazard of this view would be to focus solely on social processes to the point of excluding individual ones.

Leaders who see learning from this perspective are likely to:

- focus on social and collaborative processes in teams and classes

- view curriculum as a process of building and testing knowledge

- view learning as a process of action and dialogue that leads to improvement in knowledge

- value processes which enhance collaborative and community outcomes

- favour modes of assessment that provide a community product

- seek to improve learning by enhancing collaborative enquiry and dialogue

- orchestrate improvement through indicators of the learning culture

- talk about learning as a distributed process of building knowledge, so that all can be involved[13]

- talk about leadership as a distributed process of building culture, so that all can be involved[14]

- ensure fluid organisation, spanning boundaries

Looking to the future

Educational practice is always a mixture and a collection of tensions. It doubtless reflects elements of all three perspectives on learning, but the policy climate of the last two decades has been relentlessly of the first type, which is increasingly out-of-step with learning outside school, and with the changing world[15]. The result has been that many of the teaching profession are now risk-aversive to a focus on learning, and engaged in defensive teaching[16].

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A recent study[17] presents six possible scenarios for school systems over the next 10-20 years. They are surprisingly self-explanatory:

The status quo extrapolated

1: Robust bureaucratic school systems
2: Extending the market model

The 're-schooling' scenarios

3: Schools as core social centres
4: Schools as focused learning organisations

The 'de-schooling' scenarios

5: Learner networks and the network society
6: Teacher exodus – 'meltdown'

If those who lead learning are to contribute to schools as vital learning communities, they might be guided by two key questions:

- Have I really been leading through advancing the culture of learning, or through something else?

- Have I and others together been developing a more effective learning community?

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