

Planning learning, observing learning

Lesson planning and observation could be a waste of time or even harmful if undertaken without care and thought. **Chris Watkins'** series on pedagogy investigates



The last four articles in this series have addressed four key dimensions of classroom pedagogy and its improvement. They have sought to illuminate and promote learning that is active, collaborative, learner-driven and learning-focused. These dimensions promote effective learning and are also associated with higher performance.¹ It's also the case that teachers' professional learning is best when it is characterised by exactly these four dimensions.

However, for each of these four dimensions, I suggested that development requires us to review our current planning practices. The dominant approaches to planning that are currently used in English schools generate difficulties because of their status, use, and effects. The teaching profession must be the only group who are told that plans must become realities, and are subject to hierarchical control on the basis of plans rather than realities. Let's remember they are just plans!

These styles of planning can have other counter-productive effects: "Planning to instructional objectives can lead teachers to limit their range of response to pupil contributions."² Which is a pity given the evidence that a responsive classroom leads to better results, both academic and social.³ This sits alongside the long-standing evidence of "a tendency for planning about the instructional process and student achievement scores to be negatively correlated".⁴

Then again, plans get used for non-planning purposes – submitted to higher authorities, filed and checked – and they're judged as a paper representation of classroom teaching. When created under pressure they are clearly worthless, as was demonstrated to me by teachers in one school who said that their classrooms bore little relation to the paperwork, and they sometimes submitted the required evaluations to their lesson plans even though the lessons had never been taught!

So where do we go for a solution? The key step is to release ourselves from the dominant idea which equates learning with being taught, and to shift the focus from what teachers are doing to what learners are doing. This is crucial if students are to take more responsibility for learning and performance. But it "is not to suggest that teachers avoid planning. Rather it suggests that teachers avoid over-engineering, through gradually released control of certain processes and objectives".⁵

Planning of this sort is less detailed for a range of reasons. When teachers move beyond the 'delivery delusion', they often recognise the fallacy of believing that learning (as opposed to teaching) is infinitely plannable. Instead they will be planning the dimensions that promote effective learning by deciding such issues as:

- what activity learners will be involved in
- what combinations of learners will be used
- how learners will make choices, drive strategies and contribute their voice
- how the learning aspects will be highlighted and supported

It also becomes clear that when rich learning is occurring, goals and plans are emergent and responsive, rather than fixed in advance. This is true of many important human creations, from the smallest example of uttering a sentence: we do not know exactly how it will end up at the point we start. Additionally, teachers' planning has to remain more open so that learners can be supported to develop their part in planning. At a secondary school recently I heard some Year 10 students reporting on their "joint planning" with a teacher, and the finding that the majority of the class now regarded it as an improvement to their sessions.



The style of planning

Planning in small-time chunks (parts of a lesson) leads to teacher-directed rather than learning-directed classrooms, which means teachers need ways to regain some flexibility about time. A shift to longer and more flexible time chunks is currently in evidence in schools that succeed with curriculum innovation (see 'time shifters' in Ofsted 2008⁶). At the immediate level teachers have told me: "If you have five sessions, plan for three", which allows for responsiveness and emergence.

Wider issues of management and leadership will arise around this issue. In Sweden, one of the most decentralised education systems in Europe, recent experiments to delegate almost all decisions on the allocation of teaching hours to the schools have shown that it is not

straightforward. In lower secondary school, the degree to which teachers actually use this freedom over timing reflects other issues in the school culture: the degree of hierarchical control, the strength of teachers' subject identities, the quality of teachers' team work, and so on.⁷ Meanwhile "the majority of pupils appreciate having a responsibility and freedom to plan their own learning, but argue that they are generally not allowed to participate in decisions about teaching and learning. This is particularly the case in [core] subject lessons, which are still mainly controlled by the teachers".⁸

Time is one issue, but to "become intentional learners, students need more than an escape hatch from tight curricular schedules".⁹ We also need a shift away from thinking of the curriculum as 'delivering' facts to thinking of it as developing skills – including knowledge-building skills. The recent QCA framework of personal, learning and thinking skills offers a valuable ingredient here. I find that teachers are happy to engage with the six headings – Independent Inquirers, Creative Thinkers, Reflective Learners, Team Workers, Self Managers, Effective Participators – and appreciate their value, in primary and secondary schools alike.

The Rose review of the primary curriculum carries similar messages. In any school, carrying out an appreciative

inquiry, with the staff, of the times when the school has contributed to the development of these skills reaffirms the best of pedagogy in classrooms, and identifies important matters about the culture of the school.

So we should be moving to a position where teacher planning is:

Active: to include reviews of the experience, addressing the key question "what aspects of our planning contribute most to effective learning in our classrooms?"

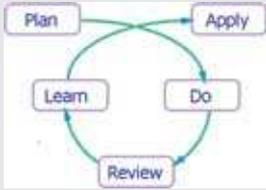
Collaborative: with teacher colleagues at first, but soon with the class too, inviting their learning questions and proposals for the process

Learner-driven: in other words the teacher should be driving how they want to learn about their planning, not having to conform to someone else's forms and formats

Learning-focused: for the class and for the teacher

Can we observe learning? No. Any definition of human learning has to recognise the meaning-making process which is a key part of learning, and although we can specify some of the features of a climate that promotes learning, we cannot actually see it. Sadly our school systems have fallen into the trap of simple measurements, and here they use some pretty poor proxies for learning, as seen in

Figure 1: Monitoring classroom learning

<p>Is it: active? Are learners invited and helped to: plan their approach to any activity? review the activity? make meaning from the experience? think ahead to other situations?</p>	
<p>Is it: collaborative? Are learners invited and helped to: complete tasks that require higher-order thinking, necessitating something different from all? develop their collaborative skills through prompts and review? operate in a range of participant structures (talk partners, a variety of groups, whole class community)?</p>	
<p>Is it: learner-driven? Are learners invited and helped to: view themselves as driving the learning? contribute their own questions, strategies and explanations? choose their challenges, develop their criteria, and assess their progress?</p>	
<p>Is it: learning-focused? Are learners invited and helped to: view themselves as learners, notice their own learning, story and discuss their own experiences of learning? share their best approaches in order to improve learning? review their learning and its progress over time?</p>	

the narrow versions of performance found in tests, 'work scrutiny' and so on. Then, of course, we end up valuing what can be measured, rather than measuring what we value. "It must be in your book." The end result is that learning is not valued, which is a shame because it's the only route to top performance.

When it comes to learning in classrooms, we can be clear about the processes we know promote effective learning in a classroom environment. So it becomes possible to monitor the extent to which these processes are in place (without implying that all of them have to be present all of the time!). Using the four dimensions of this series, figure 1 specifies under each of the headings the processes that any human being needs to go through in order to learn most effectively.



Classroom observation in school

The worst-case scenario is that teachers feel 'observed to death', and recent surveys have shown this is the case in some schools. It's not observation that's at fault, but its style and its use. As Mary Boustead of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers put it: "Self-evaluation has become self-inspection. Lesson observation is often being done in a punitive rather than an empowering way." That comment usefully points up the difference between inspection in its current form and teacher empowerment. A creative teacher recently told me of her great surprise when involved in classroom observation with a colleague: the surprise was how very different the experience was from all her past experiences of observation. It was collaborative and learning-focused and thus supported their learning – in contrast with hierarchical performance-focused experiences which were there to make quick judgements for someone else.

I sometimes discuss such issues with schools who are improving their pedagogy, as they often realise that their approach to classroom observation is contradicting their goals of improving pedagogy. If a school adopts the Ofsted framework as its approach to observing classrooms, then it is adopting a teacher-centred approach, and the old dominant story that 'learning = being taught' is emphasised once more. This is an extra shame because

surveys that observe classrooms with a more learning-orientated framework (see below) find that the classrooms which show significant signs of these elements also get better results.¹⁰

Features of classrooms with a more learning-orientated framework

Students are engaged in active participation, exploration and research

Students are engaged in activities to develop understanding and create personal meaning through reflection

Student work shows evidence of conceptual understanding, not just recall

Students apply knowledge in real world contexts

Students are presented with a challenging curriculum designed to develop depth of understanding

Teacher uses diverse experiences of students to build effective learning

Assessment allows students to exhibit higher order thinking and construct knowledge

Following a classroom observation, there's great potential for rich teacher learning. But that potential is not realised if the purpose of the observation was judgement.

There's a lot of nonsense talked about feedback. Take the 'feedback sandwich' – positive, negative, positive. This is merely a cover-up of the wrong purposes: judgement. Under these conditions people discount the negative and carry on as before. More broadly, the largest review of studies into the effects of feedback showed that on 40 per cent of occasions feedback makes performance worse.

This is explained in an important way, in terms of the effect on the receiver's level of attention. One's attention in any performance can be thought of as at one level among many in a hierarchy. It may be at a level of detail (bottom of the hierarchy) or at a level of vision and purpose (top of the hierarchy), or at points between. Feedback has a negative effect on performance when it shifts the receiver's attention downward in the hierarchy, towards detail. This can disassemble current skills and demotivate the learner.

A classroom example might be an observer who, at the end of the lesson, gives the teacher the feedback that their introduction went on for one minute longer than the plan suggested. Without any reference to wider purposes such as pupil relationships and learning goals, such feedback can be counterproductive. By contrast, feedback that has a positive effect focuses the learner's attention on their goals and purpose. It can engage their motivation and set them on a learning journey. The classroom example would be more of the type "I think the learning purpose for this session was most supported when..."

At best, feedback creates a dialogue which in turn supports the person as an active learner. If they are to move through the stages of do – review – learn – apply,

then feedback that offers some commentary (on the do), adds some issues (to the review), includes analysis (what's important to learn) and develops proposals (to apply) will create dialogue and learning.

I do not underestimate the tensions that schools and teachers face when improving pedagogy in current times. Those tensions may have existed in earlier times, but nowadays we can resolve them in a new learning-centred way.

For the themes we've looked at in this article, part of the

solution is to avoid the simplifications which abound and to which we are all invited to comply. If we are really focused on learning, things will not always be neatly planned and measured. There will always be ambiguity – and engagement – and emergence – and surprise – and...

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