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How to ... develop learning-centred classrooms

Interested in Learning?

This apparently naïve question stimulates important dynamics. Most people (quietly) reply “Of course,” sometimes following up with a qualification: “depends on what and how”. But then they may add: “Why are you asking?”

For teachers this question raises plenty of other questions about their professional purpose, and their professional development. But it is a rare question and rare focus in our schools today.

The following “HOW TO’s,” written by Chris Watkins, offer some activities which can help teachers learn about the issue and how to develop more learning-centred contexts. They are not recipes: they are frameworks for colleagues to discuss and investigate key issues. Within each HOW TO are a range of activities, along with embedded video clips, to help you apply the thinking to your own practice. Each HOW TO also gives at the end a list of resources (handouts, powerpoints, video clips and publications) which are freely available at the relevant section of www.chriswatkins.net. Interested?

How to ... spot the lack of learning

Chris Watkins says the attention given to learning in classrooms is often minimal and gives guidance on spotting the “space-invaders” which block learning.

The first step is recognising that Learning is a rare focus in classrooms and schools. After four decades of studying classroom learning issues using hidden microphones and video cameras, Nuthall’s final (2007) book was given the title “The Hidden Lives of Learners”. This reflects the dominant pattern in classrooms since they were invented 5,000 years ago: teacher initiates, students responds, teacher evaluates (Cazden, 2001). Does this accord with your experience? Or as professional educators are you spending your day in classrooms talking about learning, in staff-rooms talking about learning, in meetings talking about learning? Dreamland (which has become true in examples I know).

Try an auditory survey of a classroom: Is the word “learning” heard?

Try a visual survey: Is it seen?

Do the same at school level.

Ask children to draw a classroom and then examine any representation of learning in their offer. Discuss the results with colleagues.

My aim here is not to fall into the culture of blaming teachers, but to identify a key feature of the classroom culture. Jerome Bruner helped us regain our control of the notion of culture - humans create culture by the stories they tell. So we change the culture by changing the language and the stories. But this is most effective when it explicitly addresses the aspects of dominant culture that are getting in the way. So it helps to name what causes the problem - I identify the themes which take up the space which we would wish to give to a focus on learning as “space invaders” since they hi-jack the space we would wish to give. What candidates come to mind? Here are three.

Teaching

Phrases such as “teaching and learning policies” or “teaching and learning strategies” have been used more and more. But close examination suggests that they might better read “teaching and teaching”, since the real attention given to learning is minimal.

And the phrase is also often said as “teaching’n’learning” rather like “fish’n’chips” — the “and” is almost missed, whereas it represents both the challenge and achievement of the profession. The links between teaching and learning are complex and multiple. High-level learning doesn’t come from us teaching our socks off.

Try this provocative conversation starter with colleagues: “which do you think happens more often - teaching without learning or learning without teaching?” This can stimulate rich dialogue and highlight dominant dynamics of classroom contexts together with contrasting dynamics in non-classroom contexts.

Survey pupils’ views of learning in school.

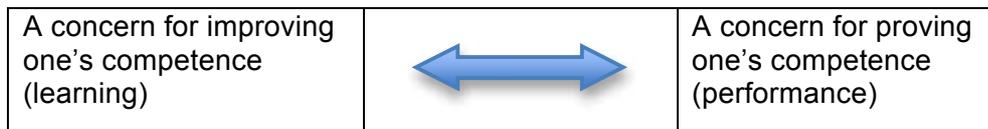
The first time I did this with a class of 5-year olds is captured on video (see clip 1). After discussing in pairs their examples of what they had learned, the class was asked to discuss “Now what do you mean by the word ‘Learning’?”. Moving from pairs to the whole class, the first contribution was Ryan: “Learning is being good and not being naughty”. This led to their teacher Juliet saying “We’ve socialised them into schooling, but forgotten to socialise them into learning”.

And don’t let any voices suggest this is some trendy modern idea. Just look at the date of this quote: “Let the beginning and the end of our didactics be: seek and find the methods where the teacher teaches less but they who sit in the desks learn more. Let schools have less rush, less antipathy and less vain effort, but more wellbeing, convenience and permanent gain” (Comenius, 1632).

Performance

The past few decades have seen an increased emphasis on pupil and school performance, together with an increasingly divisive culture between schools and between pupils. We want pupils to perform well as part of their schooling, but we don’t get good results for them by banging on about it. Reviewing the research led me to the conclusion: “a focus on learning can enhance performance, whereas a focus on performance (alone) can depress performance” (see publication: Learning Performance and Improvement).

Some approaches categorise learners as either having a performance orientation or a learning orientation. It’s more useful to think of a dimension, along which we all vary with different situations, and along which different situations vary:



This could even explain the most recent evidence about UK 15-year olds. In the PISA 2015 questionnaire results, pupils in England reported receiving more feedback from their teachers than their peers in top-performing countries, and lower performing pupils in UK reported receiving more feedback from their teachers than their colleagues (OECD, 2016, page 289).

We could ask what orientation a classroom promotes. One major study identified four classrooms with significantly different motivational profiles (Patrick et al, 2001). Over two terms of observation focused on teachers’ talk and practices, the following features were consistent across time:

In a Learning-oriented Classroom, teachers spoke about learning as an active process that requires student involvement and discussion; that understanding - rather than memorization and replication - is important; and that interaction is a key feature.

In a Performance-oriented Classroom, teachers spoke about learning as an individual process achieved by listening and following instructions; correct answer is the goal, following procedures is the method. (see publication: “Learning about Learning”)

How do classrooms you know fare on these features?

Discuss your observations with colleagues.

Schools which develop learning-centred practice get good results. In 2012 a headteacher I had worked with from a primary school in a disadvantaged area of Leeds sent me her school data under the heading “Best Results Ever”. In 2013 they were better again.

The improved results are also less divisive. In the past I have written “The only intervention which achieves both equity and excellence is one that is learning-centred” (see publication: “Developing learning-centred classrooms and schools”) and since then evidence from a secondary school which developed a “learning to learn” programme demonstrated that attainment gap between socially disadvantaged students and others moved from 25% in the year before the programme to just 2% in the L2L group (Mannion & Mercer 2016).

Work

Listen in any classroom: “Get on with your work”, “Please Miss he's copying my work”, “Home work,” “Schemes of work”, “Have you finished your work?” It can be the dominant discourse of classroom life. But it can lead to a situation of meaningless work, as when people talk about being “on task” without assessing the learning quality or engagement.

The discourse of “work” shifts the locus of agency: as Harrison (8 years) said to his teacher Donna: “When you work you work for someone else, and when you learn you learn for yourself.”

Having spotted this, what can we do? This space invader gives us a starting example of how to change its effect: change from talking about work to learning: for example “homework” to “home learning”. Another school in Leeds had a whole-school assembly where the head said “From today on, no more work, only learning”. She reported that Year 1 children ran back to their classrooms excitedly enquiring: “Is it true? Is it true?”

Can you think of other examples where the word “work” is used and you could experiment with substituting the word “learning”?

When we have identified the space invaders we are empowered into “Naming and Taming” their negative effects.

Survey your school's website, counting the incidence of terms which fall under the categories: teaching, performance, work, learning.

Resources

[Handout: Talking about learning – are we really?](#)

[Handout: Enquiry: our school's messages about learning](#)

[Clip 1](#): five-year old pupils talking about what they mean by the word “learning”.

[Clip 2](#): eight-year old pupils in a school in Devon which had worked with my colleague Jane Reed - including one who says “How do you **not** talk about learning if you're in school?”

[Publication: Learning - a sense-maker's guide](#)

[Publication: Learning about Learning](#)

[Publication: Learning Performance and Improvement](#)

How to ... build a focus on learning

Chris Watkins explores how using *Appreciative Inquiry* can ensure a focus on learning.

When the dominant culture is not clearly focussing and not sufficiently geared towards learning, *Appreciative Inquiry* (Hammond 2013) is an effective approach. Originally an organization development strategy, *Appreciative Inquiry* utilises a social process of inquiry and joint discovery. Carried out by organizational members themselves, through face-to face interviews, the process legitimized everyone's curiosity about what works for self and others and allows the unveiling of each other's peak experiences. It operates on the following four principles: In every context something works well, so what you want more of already exists (this gives the lie to the views of “hostile witnesses”).

We create our reality locally (especially through language). An inquiry can become a positive intervention. People have more confidence in moving into the unknown when they carry with them parts of the known. *Appreciative Inquiry* has been adapted to the pedagogy of management education (Yballe and O'Connor 2000), but I first met it in 1998 as an approach to “post-Ofsted syndrome” (Whalley 1998). This clarified the cycle:



When we apply this to classrooms, we start with “In every classroom something works well”. This helps to remind ourselves of our own achievements. Then we can choose what to focus on and what to inquire about, and how we make that choice makes a big difference. So if we enquire about classroom learning, where will that lead? Try the following exercise with colleagues:

Take a few minutes to think of a classroom you know, in which the sense of learning has been really positive. Maybe there has been engagement, excitement, reflection, whatever.

Choose the best experience you can and reconstruct it in your mind's eye. Capture in concrete detail the things that made that experience possible.

When you have made sense of this positive occasion, and how it was made possible, try to capture something important to take forward by completing:

"To me effective learning in classrooms happens when ..."

The next step is to analyse how this best experience was helped to happen, and how more of these experiences could be created. This will often involve discussion and negotiation with colleagues.

And then making an important choice of when and how you will try out an experiment to see whether more of the best can be created. It's best to treat this experiment as an active enquiry from which more will be learned, rather than a test.

Resources

[Handout: Effective Learning in Classrooms - an appreciative inquiry](#)

[Publication: Developing learning-centred classrooms and schools](#)

How to ... address “effective learning”

Chris Watkins explores what constitutes effective learning and how to create a culture which encourages more learner autonomy.

Phase one: identifying and fostering effective learning

There are many views around about what constitutes an effective learner. Many of them do not stand up to the evidence (see publication: Effective Learning). Briefly, an effective learner is someone who knows (and acts accordingly) that:

- it's **their** actions which are crucial for their learning
- interaction with colleagues can be a key process in their learning
- they can plan monitor and regulate their learning

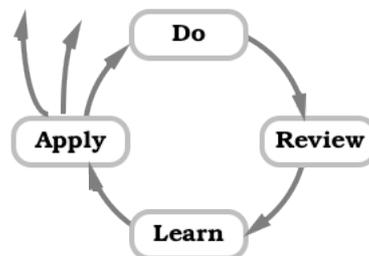
These headings create the first three of four for effective classroom learning:

- active
- collaborative
- learner-driven

These will be elaborated below, but with only a brief introduction I find these three have a high degree of match with teachers' best experiences of classroom learning (see photos of beginner teachers, experienced teachers, headteachers and inspectors at chriswatkins.net/key-issues).

Active

This does not mean more activity for its own sake! It means learning from activity through another active cycle:



So after the doing, we talk it through, either to ourselves (that's called “thinking”) or with others, and then make meaning of the experience and the key events, and thinking forward to other situations. This process can be applied to a wide range of activities which can promote learning, including reading and writing.

Teachers' reservations will always be present, and best that they are voiced and addressed. Many are predictable:

“I have to cover the curriculum”. Sorry, who is covering the curriculum? Isn't it the students' task to do that? And the more active they can be in that task, the better the results.

“It takes too long”. So what's the short-cut? - ah teacher telling them (again)

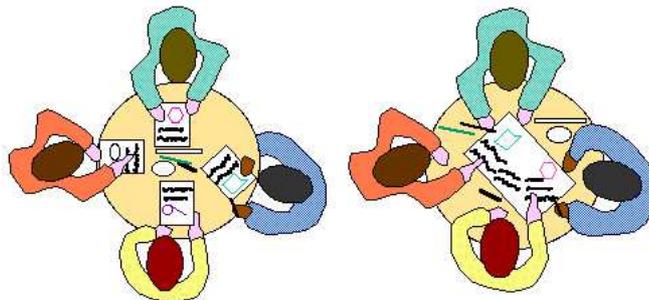
“It's a lot of planning”. It may feel like that in the early phases, but as the balance shifts towards planning for learner activity, and learners become better planners too, it may take less planning time and therefore liberate teachers for more responding time.

“It will all fall apart and the behaviour will worsen.”

These represent some classic fears which arise when we do something different in the complex context of the classroom, but if the tasks and prompts for the action learning cycle are well designed you'll get more engagement and better behaviour.

Collaborative

In many classrooms pupils may be placed in groups around a table, but that does not mean they are operating in groups. The key feature is whether they are collaborating to create a joint product of some sort:



The communication is central. As Annie (10 years) puts it, in an interview with my colleague Caroline Lodge:

“You learn more [when working with others] because if you explain to people what to do, you say things that you wouldn't say to yourself, really. So you learn things that you wouldn't know if you were just doing it by yourself”.

To promote more collaboration in classrooms, we need to design the collaborative task for pupils. It aims to give them the experience of creating something together which they could not have created alone. First, the task must not be 'decomposable'; in other words, it must not be able to be completed by one member of the group, Second, the task must require the contribution of all members of the group, through their different voices, angles, roles, and so on. Finally, the task cannot be a 'right answer' task: instead it must require higher-order thinking and the negotiation of meaning.

Learner-driven

When learners feel in charge of their learning, and able to vary it, it is a key achievement. For example “When I'm stuck, I go back and check instead of guessing”, says Vikesh (11 years). Of the variation in school performance, 34% of it is attributed to variation in learners' self-regulation (Vukman & Likardo 2010).

The metaphor of driving is a good one for using everyday language .Try the following sequence and see whether it describes some of your experience of learning:

Before starting:

- Where do we want to get to?
- Which way should we go?
- Has someone got a map?
- Or shall we make up our own route?
- Is there anything to remember from previous journeys?
- Do we need to take any equipment?

On the road:



How's it going?
Are we on the right track?
Do we need to change direction?
Has anyone gone another way?
Cor look!

Journey's end:

Where did we get to?
Is this the place we planned? Maybe it's better!
Did anyone get here by another route?
Where next?

Learners who are competent in self-regulation show it in a range of ways, including when their “results” are good. One head wrote: “The children's response was fascinating, almost laid back in a sort of 'well we told you so' sort of way! They were pleased, don't get me wrong but they were confident they'd got it before the results were published.”

With each of the three sub-headings, consider a time in your classroom experience when it was going well:

What helped it?

How could it happen more often?

What could you do to make it happen?

Resources

[Handout: Talking about effective learning](#)

Handouts: [Active Learning](#), [Collaborative Learning](#), [Driving learning](#)

[Handout: Monitoring classroom learning](#)

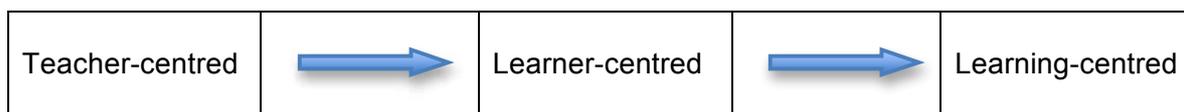
[Powerpoint: 1 Active learning \(workshop\)](#)

[Powerpoint: 2 Collaborative learning \(workshop\)](#)

[Powerpoint: 3 Learner-driven learning](#)

[Publication: Effective Learning](#)

Now we are ready to develop classrooms which are learning-centred. The move from teacher-centred classrooms needs to happen in two phases:



If teachers try to rush these phases, for example by introducing some terms about learning, their classroom will be inhabited by low-agency pupils thinking “Hello, teacher has been on a course”. And we must beware implying that an effective learner is some sort of recipe. “An effective learner is versatile and can actively utilize different strategies and approaches for different contexts and purposes” (see publication: Effective Learning). So we need to build a classroom context where pupils are involved in different learning strategies together with explicit sense-making

of the learning. Teachers' role is key, especially if they act as learners too: "By modeling their own thinking processes, learning-oriented teachers demonstrated that being unsure, learning from mistakes, and asking questions were natural and necessary parts of learning" (Turner et al 2002).

Phase two: towards Learning-centred

The move from learner-centred practice to learning-centred practice involves learning about learning. If we take learning to be the human process of making sense of experience, then learning about learning = making sense of your experiences of learning. Classroom practices can involve:

- making learning an object of attention – Noticing learning;
- making learning an object of conversation – Talking about learning;
- making learning an object of reflection – Reviewing experiences of learning;
- making learning an object of learning – Experimenting with learning.

Zoe was operating her classroom of 6-year olds as a learning community. At one point she asked the class to write about their experience of learning. Lucy wrote: "I have learned from books and the TV and even toys. I have learned from fresh air. I have learned from other people at class time. I have learned from Miss Bonnell. I have learned from pictures and computers. I have learned from writing."

Think of a topic which would be an appropriate starter for a conversation about learning with a class you know.

One strategy which can help these processes is the use of "storyboards", a simple structure on a sheet of paper giving a title focus, and then three boxes for pupils to draw something about the beginning, middle and end of the story, some space to add a few words on each and finally an incomplete sentence on the focus such as "I can help myself take charge of my learning by " See powerpoint "learning storyboards" slides 8 & 17-18 "A time when I took charge of my learning", slide 12 "My most impressive learning" slides 14-16 "Some learning I'm proud of."

Choose a topic for storyboards which would be appropriate for a class you know. Share with colleagues and decide when you will try it out.

Classroom conversations can be held on topics of learning. Juliet in a London school invited her class of Year 6 pupils to clarify in pairs what they meant by "learn, know, understand" (she had just read some research on it). The result was so rich she asked some pairs to continue, with video-recording (clip 7). She was so glad she had the video camera! One says "I think learning is ... you watch, and you teach yourself sometimes or other people or other objects help you, and you like listen, you watch, and you like add to what people say." Multiple sources, multiple dimensions, adding to the narrative!

My stance is:

- The more richly someone narrates their learning, the more they see their own role in it.
- The more someone sees their own role in their learning, the more they become able to plan, monitor and review (i.e. be an effective learner).

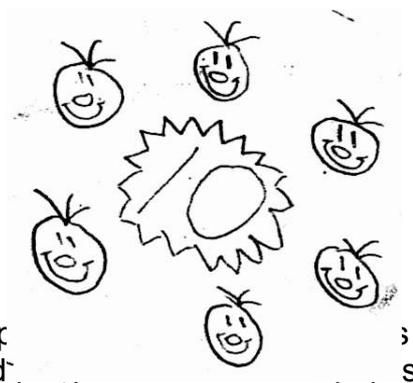
- The more they become an effective learner, the more they see other people and a range of contexts as important resources in their learning.
(see publication Learning about Learning)

On one occasion I was in conversation with 10-year olds about some of their classroom practices (see clip 8), I heard Praise uses the term “metalearning”, which she then clarifies: “knowing yourself as a learner - which is a good thing”. As the first person to write a publication entitled “Metalearning in classrooms” I needed picking up off the floor! The headteacher of their school in Sheffield wrote to me in an everyday email: “Things here are great. Despite all the changes that are happening, the staff and children at school are still focused on the importance of being good learners and knowing themselves as learners. ... What I am delighted to report, is that the language of learning and the children's understanding of themselves as learners is far more embedded throughout the school. As a result, the children are leaving us as well rounded, confident and talented young people. In terms of the benchmarks, we are now exceeding national expectations in terms of attainment at the end of KS2 and also in terms of progress.”

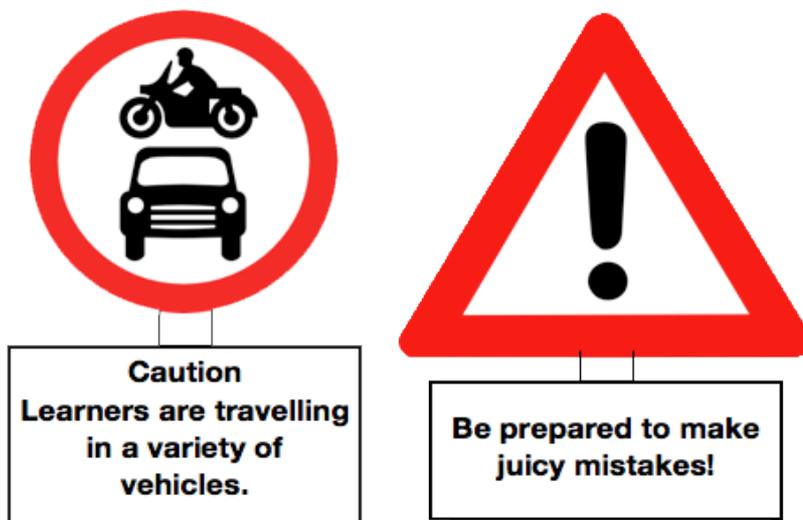
One of the outcomes of such conversations can be public record in the classroom through posters and so on. In one London school, Joel Benji Maya Sumaya and Samka (Year 5) were creating a classroom poster on “How to take charge of our learning”. They included

1. Don't give up
2. Keep practicing
3. Say to yourself “you can do it”
4. Keep believing
5. Try very hard
6. Think about how to solve the problem
7. Close your eyes and concentrate
8. Write your ideas down
9. Make a time when you can practice it
10. Decide for yourself what to do

And they represented themselves on the poster as:



In other classrooms I have seen “Learning Journey” displays where students raised on a topic, together with resolutions and adapted road signs to highlight important aspects, including:



A “juicy mistake” was defined as a mistake we can all learn from, and pupils were commended for finding them.

Over 50 years ago, Jerry Bruner was saying “Modern pedagogy is moving increasingly to the view that the child should be aware of her own thought processes, and that it is crucial for the pedagogical theorist and teacher alike to help her become more metacognitive - to be as aware of how she goes about her learning and thinking as she is about the subject matter she is studying. Achieving skill and accumulating knowledge are not enough: the learner can be helped to achieve full mastery by reflecting as well upon how she is going about her job and how her approach can be improved” (Bruner, 1966).

There’s nothing more valuable that schooling can help young people develop than self-control and the ability to take a perspective. The field of learning is a rich one for developing both of these.

“In classrooms where a sense of community is built, students are crew, not passengers”. See page 47 of Publication: Classrooms as Learning Communities. Does the same point apply to teachers?

Resources

[Handout: When pupils talk about learning](#)

[Powerpoint: 4 Learning about learning](#)

[Powerpoint: 5 Learning storyboards](#)

[Powerpoint 6 Classroom LEARNING environment](#)

[Powerpoint 7b Building learning orientation in classrooms](#)

[Videoclip 8](#)

[Videoclip 7](#)

[Publication: Learning about Learning](#)

[Publication: Classrooms as Learning Communities](#)

How to ... treat teachers as learners

Professional development is all about learning. Chris Watkins calls for teachers to be empowered as learners, for the need to combat siren external voices which distract from learning, and for school leaders to see themselves as lead learners.

One of the last large research project on classrooms in UK, *Learning How To Learn*, demonstrated two important elements for this theme. Current classroom practice on promoting learning autonomy shows a large values-practice gap with teachers' values (James & Pedder, 2006). Teachers who stay in the profession nowadays have a wider vision than simply a focus on current practice. Also, the only school practice which helped teachers develop an explicit focus on learning in their classrooms was inquiry (Pedder, 2006). So greater agency for pupils develops with greater agency for teachers.

And this point also links the levels of learning among all those who are present in the school setting. As key workers in this field have put it: "We have come to see that it is not possible to either fully or sustainably promote the agency of the school or the teacher without the knowledge and skill to promote the agency of the pupil" (Reed & Lodge, 2006: 5).

Personal Inquiry.

Try to identify some occasions in your professional experience when you have felt like a rich professional learner.

Identify some of the key elements which created those occasions.

Discuss and compare with colleagues.

An immediate parallel follows: if we treat teachers as learners, then staff development activities for teachers should display the same characteristics as were explored in the other HOW TO pieces for effective learning in classrooms: active, collaborative, learner-driven, learning-focussed. When these processes are in place teachers start to make changes in their classrooms which are against the grain of the dominant patterns.

How are your professional development activities doing currently:

Are you involved as an active learner, i.e. reviewing practice, making sense of the patterns, planning new practice?

Are you involved as a collaborative learner, i.e. involved in dialogue with colleagues, creating more together than you would individually?

Are you involved in a learner-driven way, i.e. influencing the agenda and the activities?

Are your activities learning-centred, i.e. focused on pupil learning, teacher learning, school learning?

Implications for leadership were summarized in Southworth's (2005) "Essential tasks for leaders" as:

- Making learning central to their work
- Consistently communicating the centrality of student learning
- Articulating core values that support a focus on powerful, equitable learning
- Paying public attention to efforts to support learning

Tensions with the external will arise. An inspiring account of a school regaining control of its agenda comes from an Oldham school where they noticed something important about the external agenda: “We suddenly spotted that they were all making it up. And we said ‘What if we made it up?’”. One of the many activities which followed involved pupils asking “What if we were wizards?” and creating an inspiring list of qualities of wizard learners (Arya et al, 2007).

Notice those times when a voice says “I can’t focus on learning because XX” and share examples with your colleagues. These voices have less impact when they are brought into the open, and ways of moving forward can be devised.

Schools from a learning-centred improvement network decided to write an account and call it “The Adventurous School” (Reed et al 2012). This does not mean taking risks for their own sake, but it does mean building a culture of inquiry. Again, this applies to all levels of the community. As one headteacher put it: “Central to our vision is staff learning with each other, the children and their parents.”

The Newcastle *Learning to Learn* team has investigated which schools “take off” most with a learning to learn agenda, and highlighted the distributed nature of agency and leadership: “In some schools there is the convergence of leadership values and action and teacher agency in sympathy with the leadership values and the here one can see the strongest effects. In these schools research culture and processes emerge as a significant factor. It appears to give schools greater confidence in terms of their ability to identify factors affecting attainment and motivation and potential levers for change and makes teachers more reflective and critical” (Wall & Hall, 2009).

How does your school fare on these dimensions?

Compare your thoughts with the following summary points from teachers on a project:

- Aspects of the school’s language and culture an open and honest ethos which supports reflection
- School leadership who view themselves as learners
- Staff meetings more learning focused and less managerial
- Peer-collaborative enquiry into teaching and learning, e.g. lesson study, professional learning communities
- An open and valuing approach to teacher’s practice being shared – show and tell during meetings, videoing lessons
- Being encouraged to innovate, review, take what are perceived to be risks
- A collaborative approach to the development agenda
- Showing the children that you are a learner

Again, the language used by school has an impact. Matt Chappel (a key member of the London Network of Learning-Centred Schools) had the sign outside his school refer to him as “lead learner” rather than “head teacher.” I happened to look at the KS2 results for the school, which serves disadvantaged students - the DfE website said “there is no statistically better performing school in this group that is within a 75 mile radius of the focus school”. Other schools in UK have had this description, but not in London, so even by those “standards” it was the best in London.

Resources

Handout: [What helps Teachers see themselves as learners](#)

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