

Numeracy: Important but Messy

Lucy Hoyes investigates.

The Seeds of New Research

A range of teachers discuss their new studies.

Positivism vs Interpretivism

Is there a middle-ground?

School Leadership

Taking an evidence based approach.



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CHRIS WATKINS

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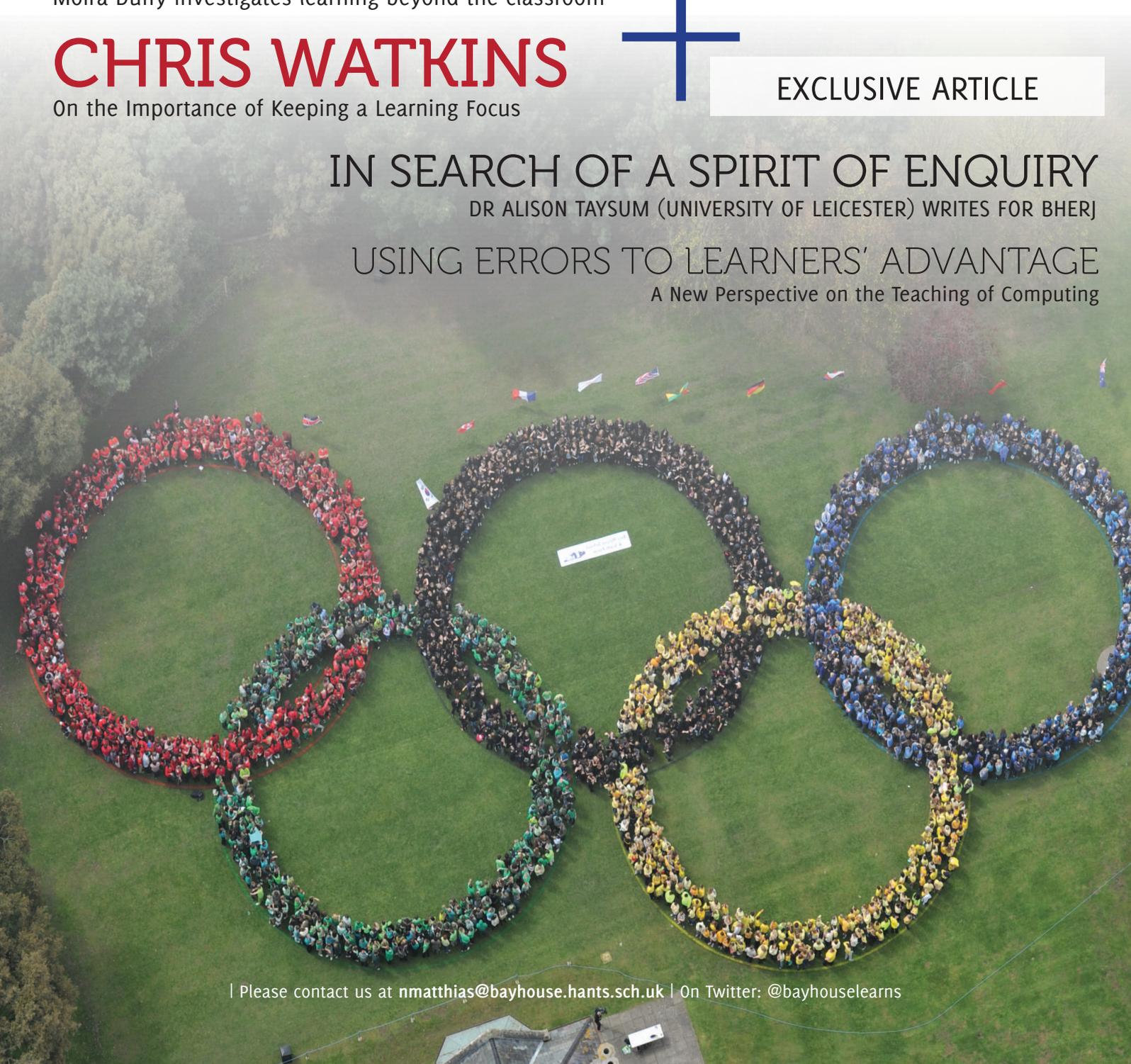
EXCLUSIVE ARTICLE

IN SEARCH OF A SPIRIT OF ENQUIRY

DR ALISON TAYSUM (UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER) WRITES FOR BHERJ

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KEEPING YOUR FOCUS WHILE ALL AROUND ARE LOSING THEIRS

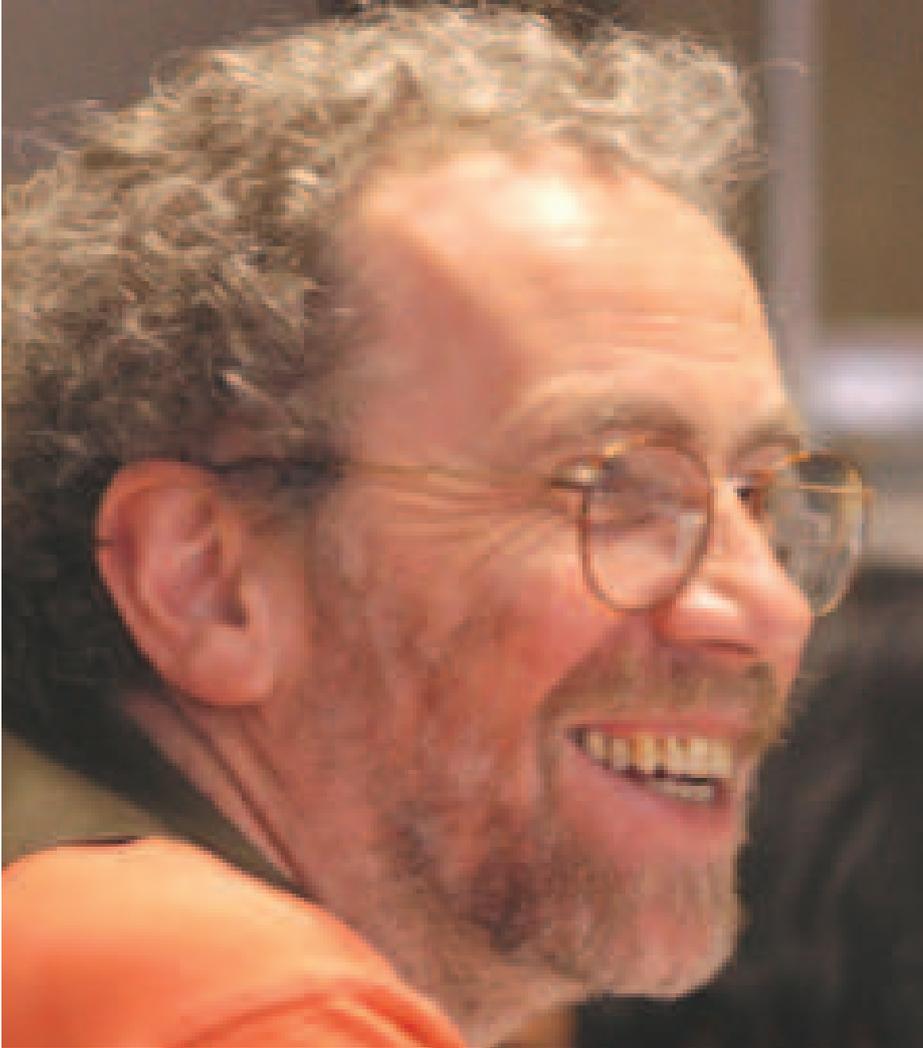
And the students see it too. Here are a few comments from some students in Devon, who all go to “good” schools, selected from a conversation about learning out of school:

“All through my education, teachers have just been telling me, drumming it into me, that if we don’t get our grades, we’re going down the drain and not worth anything. The message is too loud, too much.”

“The teachers want the grades. They need the results.”

“Stop there being so much fear in the system. All the teachers are scared of students getting bad grades.”

A very frustrating aspect of all of this is that exam factories don’t get good results – they could be better, and with them much better long term effects. Because if we put aside the gaming and the fiddling and the grade inflation, and look at research on performance, then it paints a picture which I find all teachers recognise – about themselves and their students. It is that our highest level of performance is achieved when we’re at our best as learners. A research review I completed two years ago could have been headlined “A focus on learning can enhance performance: a focus on performance



A MOVE TO LEARNER-CENTERED CLASSROOMS?

IN AN EXCLUSIVE ARTICLE, THE INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION’S CHRIS WATKINS WRITES FOR THE BAY HOUSE JOURNAL.

Our central heating broke down recently, and I had to call someone in to fix it. A man named Kevin turned up, fixed it quickly and then he struck up a conversation:

He: “What line of work are you in?”

Me: “I work with schools on understanding learning”

He: “I think schools have become places for coaching students in exam marks”.

After I had picked myself up, Kevin went on to explain how his daughter, just going to university, had plenty of A stars but (in his words) “little useable knowledge” from her schooling.

I was surprised and relieved to hear such a clear critique from an everyday parent about the condition of many schools today: exam factories. But then the British Social Attitudes Survey (2010) asked its large representative sample to respond to the statement “schools focus too much on tests and exams and not enough on learning for its own sake”. 64% of the population agree. So Kevin is in a clear majority of the adult population (excluding politicians).

We’re living in times where narrow views of school performance are accompanied by narrow views of how to achieve it. If schooling is all about grades, then we see drilling, spoon-feeding, targets, pressure.

can depress performance” (Watkins 2010). One national newspaper gave it the headline “Pupils do better if teachers are not fixated on test results”.

So how can we do better than the temptation of short-term strategies with short-term effects and longer-term disadvantages (including decreasing equity)? A minority of schools have spotted this state of affairs and found another way – focusing on learning.

That doesn’t mean adding on another teacher-led course. As another one of the Devon students said: “Learning to Learn seemed really pointless. I never learnt anything from Learning to Learn, which is quite ironic”. Adding some outsider’s language is not a good way of starting a learning dialogue with your own students (Martin & Roberts, 2007).

Packages for promoting learning are often attractive to schools. But they depart from learning principles and usually revert to teacher-centred classrooms. Many researchers who have focussed on learning have noticed the “lethal mutations” that occur when someone else creates a package out of their work. Most recently this process has been recognised affecting “Assessment for Learning”. As Dylan Wiliam said to the TES recently: “The problem is that government told schools that it was all about monitoring pupils’ progress; it wasn’t about pupils becoming owners of their own learn-



ing” (Stewart, 2012).

Schools which have developed learning how to learn have only one feature going on in the organization which supports it: inquiry (Pedder, 2006). Which is why practices like Bay House’s professional learning communities are so important. The powerful sense of teachers as learners came across to me when I visited the show case of Bay House’s professional learning communities in the summer term. As a complete outsider, I was impressed at the way colleagues responded to my (sometimes quite challenging) questions, especially about AfL: example “that’s not AfL, that’s AfEM: assessment for exam marks”. I was struck that colleagues responded constructively and engaged with such challenge.

When we focus on the place that makes the difference, the classroom, major studies have helped us identify a key issue that makes a difference – the way the teacher talks about learning.

And classroom change is a real challenge, especially if we try to rush it. So nowadays I encourage people to consider it as two phases: firstly a move from teacher-centred class-

rooms to learner-centred classrooms, with more active, collaborative and learner-driven learning. With this phase our students come to think of themselves as classroom learners. Only then can the second phase take off: the move to learning-centred classrooms where the language of learning develops authentically, and everyone (teachers too) see themselves as learners together. The journey is not well-supported by the wider voice in our education system, but the end-points are inspiring – in terms of both learning and performance.

References

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