

Communicating...

The ESRC Network Project Newsletter

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Focus on ... a teacher working with Project 1

Lynne Webb is the Head of Mathematics at Arthur Mellows Village College, a secondary comprehensive on the edge of Peterborough. Lynne, an experienced and confident teacher with many years service to the school, began to reflect on how the students' views could contribute to improving their Maths experience - and she discovered some key areas to concentrate on in her practice. [Project 1, led by Donald McIntyre and David Peddar, is about how teachers use students' comments on teaching and learning.]

It began first of all by the researcher coming in and observing my year 8 class and meeting them so he knew what they were like. Then he asked me, by talking to them, to come up with a selection of students for him to interview regularly throughout the two terms, about teaching styles and how they felt they had learnt from different teaching styles. We also looked at how I could provide them with opportunities within the ordinary school situation of having their voices heard. The intention was for his interviews to be a first stage and then for me to develop ideas and systems myself.

The way it was done was to ask the students who should represent them and then me look through their choices to see what would give a fair representation of gender and ability. The students came up with a good broad cross-section, as it turned out, but when I saw some of the names on the list I thought, 'Oh no! What are they going to say about me!' One or two of them were the most indisciplined in the class and were the ones who were least likely, I thought, to enjoy the different styles of teaching I try to use. I thought they would be negative, but actually they weren't. They were good at identifying things that were working well for them as learners, like the way I tried to link things visually for them.

There were surprises for me in what emerged. They were, first of all, generally very perceptive on how they were learning and they weren't dishonest either -

they were quite critical when they thought something wasn't right for them. It made me wonder if they always reflected like this without me knowing. One girl in particular clearly seemed to understand - better than I did! - how she learned. Some, interestingly, were immediately reflective in a highly sophisticated way - beyond my expectation - but nobody had known that before because nobody had asked them. For others, the reflection grew through the process of reflection, which wouldn't happen if they weren't given that opportunity. I was very struck by how much richer the transcripts of the interviews were compared with anything we had discovered through questionnaires.

So what we did with that group was helpful but what was really good for me was that it helped me to come up with ways of getting other classes to reflect on their learning and get some sort of feedback to see if other methods and styles were useful. I haven't used individual interviews, obviously, but I do use informal feedback from groups as they are working on a particular piece of work. I think the biggest impact the whole thing had was on positive feedback that I wasn't able to get by any other means. When I'd used something that was different, I might have stopped using it next year because I thought they hadn't really learned anything from it or it was a waste of time in some way but what they were telling me was that they actually wanted more of some of the activities that I personally had felt had had too much time spent on them, that they hadn't learned much from. So it was the reflection from them that gave me the positive feedback which I used to persevere with similar approaches to other classes. And I

particularly trusted them on that because they had explained how it had worked, why it had worked and they were actually requesting more of it.

The fun thing was what came out the most. I do try to make my lessons fun, and sometimes I think, 'Am I just doing it to make it fun? Or is there some true learning happening behind that? Is there just the interest? Or is there also a way of them learning better through that particular style?' But sometimes in Maths when you do something that is practical, physical and fun, it gives them the slow-down thinking time that they need to work things out as well as the enjoyment and enthusiasm to carry on. So I learned from them that they thought it important to be given time to think more. Just because we're told it's important to accelerate their learning doesn't necessarily mean we can, just by pushing on ever faster - and there are a lot of pressures on us to just cover the syllabus. You get so that schemes of work are getting in the way if you're not careful.

So the project's been really valuable. I have to say that if it wasn't for this project, I wouldn't be trying half the things that I am trying with my classes this year. So from a personal point of view, it gave me a lot of positive feedback. As for the Department, we've written a new scheme of work with numeracy strategy in mind, because we have to, for year 7 and part of year 8, and into that, I've built in references to activities that I've worked on from what pupils have said in the Project. So it's good - *their* ideas are there.

The Learning School

What is the Learning School?

The Learning School is a world first among school improvement initiatives, exemplifying a genuinely bottom-up approach.

Conceived by teachers and carried out by school students, bringing in academic and policy-makers as critical friends, it sends an important message to those who believe that reform only trickles down from the top.

An international venture

The Learning School is an international project involving seven countries – Scotland, Germany, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Germany, South Africa, and Japan. Organised by the schools themselves, it is a collaborative self-driven network. Each of these participating countries selects one (in some cases two) students to spend a school year on an academic world tour, visiting each of the seven schools in turn for a period of four weeks.

Students as researchers

Together they comprise the Learning School team – a group of students working intensively together to plan, evaluate and provide written reports on each of the seven schools plus a final comparative study drawing out the key cross-cutting messages.

Self evaluation

The focus of their work is self-evaluation. With research support from Cambridge and Nara universities, they have devised a toolbox of instruments to use in schools and classrooms, with students, teachers and parents. These include observation and shadowing protocols, questionnaires and spot checks.

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Using the toolbox

Over a four week period the students observe in classrooms often with a focus on specific pupils, following some over the course of the day, conducting probing interviews about their motivation and learning, cross referencing these with other, quantitative, data. At the end of the four weeks they feed back their findings to staff in a spirit of shared discovery and dialogue.

Emotional absenteeism

That is at least the theory. In depth evaluation which probes beneath surface learning tends to uncover disconcerting evidence about the nature of pupil engagement and motivation. Brilliant teaching does not guarantee deep learning and instruments such as the spot check and follow-up interviews reveal a degree of mental and emotional absenteeism which often comes as a surprise to teachers. It is particularly discomfiting when it is the brightest of pupils who turn out to be the most bored, living out their own private lives in the classroom.

Alternative inspection

The Learning school reaches parts that inspections generally fail to reach for a number of reasons. Firstly, evaluations are conducted by school students who can get close to their peers without the inhibitions of status and authority. Secondly, students have time at their disposal, time to listen and probe, time to reflect, revisit, check out what they are seeing and hearing. Thirdly,

there is no accountability high-stakes agenda, no sanctions to follow, no hidden penalties for disclosure. Of course, school students lack the breadth of experience of a practised inspectorate and find their social and political skills tested to the full when there is conflict and confrontation about their findings. But that is in the nature of self-evaluation and a powerful lesson for everyone involved.

A lesson for life

For the Learning School students it is a lesson they learn for life. As one student put it, speaking for the whole team:

“We have learned more in this year than we have in the whole of our school education. I know for me personally, it has changed my life. I feel I am a totally different person. I cannot begin to describe how much it has made me rethink everything I was taught in

A book about the Learning School project is planned for publication by Routledge.

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Schools ought to be happy places ...

At the beginning of June, two days before the General Election, Guardian Education published a report on its competition, "The School I'd Like", pointing out that "children's voices had not been heard during the election campaign". They had well over 15,000 entries. The study was initiated and informed by Dr Catherine Burke of the School of Education at the University of Leeds whose work on this material is to form a complete archive, kept at Leeds, which will enable comparative work to be carried out across national boundaries and over time. The material below is adapted from the report on this work written for the Guardian by Dea Birkett and is printed here with kind permission from the Guardian..

What sort of school did the students want?

A beautiful school - with glass dome roofs, uncluttered classrooms and brightly coloured walls.

A comfortable school - with sofas, beanbags, cushions, tables that don't scrape knees, blinds keeping out the sun, and quiet rooms.

A safe school - with swipe cards, anti-bully alarms, first-aid classes, and people to talk over problems with.

A listening school - with students on governing bodies, class representatives and the chance to choose teachers.

A flexible school - without rigid timetables, compulsory homework or all-purpose curricula.

A relevant school - with learning through experience, experiment and exploration.

A respectful school - where children and adults can talk freely and student opinions matter.

A school without walls - so students can go outside the school to learn.

A school for everybody - with students from all backgrounds and abilities.

Is yours a listening school?

What are your students telling you?

"Respect", the Guardian reports, was the single word that occurred most - what students wanted most but rarely encountered. "They were cajoled into doing work they weren't interested in, made to fit into someone else's ideal curriculum and most of all not listened to. They were treated like kids." They objected to "... unfair rules, written only for the benefit of adults" and hated more than anything else the "bad, boring teacher" who should, in some students' view, be eliminated altogether or, more frequently, be retrained to become more flexible, understanding and enthusiastic.

How should students be listened to? According to them, they should be fully integrated into the democratic process of the school, school assemblies should be replaced by debates and rows in classrooms should be abolished in favour of circles.

"We will no longer be treated as herds of an identical animal waiting to be civilised before we are let loose on the world ... We will cease to be thought of as useless vessels waiting in disciplined conditions to be filled with our quota of information ... We will be thought of as individual people." Miriam Grossfeld, upper secondary

Send us your accounts of what your students tell you - or ask them to tell us themselves - for inclusion in future editions.

Active networking for members

The Network now has its own website for members at:

www.consultingpupils.co.uk

At the moment, it contains copies of all current materials, such as newsletters and reading lists together with an explanation of the aims and structure of the project. You should have received this material through the post already (if you haven't, please contact Nichola Daily by phone, letter or email). Can't lay your hands on them just at the moment? Download them off the web. *(As they are pdf files, make sure you have the Adobe Acrobat plug-in installed in your browser, or click the Adobe link on the first page of the site to download it free, direct from Adobe.)* An electronic joining form is provided for new members. You may want to direct colleagues, who you think might be interested in participating, to the website to join up.

But active networking? At the moment, the network contains at least three groups of schools we are aware of who are collaborating to support each other in their work on consulting pupils (more on these clusters in future issues) but clearly with well over two hundred schools and individuals in the network, there is scope for considerably more interaction and mutual support.

So the website's main function is to serve as a database (secure and password-protected) of all those members who would welcome communication with and support from other members. Re-invigorating a student council? Find out how others are setting about it. Want to find other geographers in your area who are interested in improving their practice through talking to pupils? Consult the database. Above all, make your own contacts and set up your own networks: the ESRC Network Project will support you in any ways that it feasibly can.

If you would like to be included in the database, please return the enclosed form to Nichola, preferably by the end of September.

If you have any further suggestions for expanding the usefulness to you of the website, please let us know. Similarly, if you have comments on the newsletter, and especially comments as to how it could be improved, we are always pleased to hear them. Above all, if you would like to share with other members your thoughts on any aspects of the work you are doing, the Newsletter is the place to air them: please write in with articles, accounts, letters, queries. We are anxious that this publication should not only be useful to, but also belong to, you and other members.

Reminder

There will be a training conference for Network members who are new to pupil consultation or who want to know more about it - **Thursday November 1, 2001**, in Cambridge. Please contact Nichola Daily if you would like to be sent further details.

A conference at which teachers will be invited to present their work with pupils - and which Lord Puttnam will attend - will be held, in Cambridge, on **Saturday March 16, 2002**.

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