
When Teachers Reclaim Learning

CHRIS WATKINS

ABSTRACT This account describes and analyses some of the processes which are important for teachers to maintain a creative role in promoting learning while in a climate of managerialism and performativity. It does so from the stance of someone who works with teachers and schools on a minority interest in current times – learning. Processes needed to combat some of the mechanical official discourses, and the disempowerment and demoralisation of teachers are outlined, as well as those which challenge the silence on learning. It amounts to a story of teachers reclaiming agency.

As a foretaste of the first theme in this article, I offer a characterisation of the developmental work with teachers which underpins this account: it is focussed on an activity which is rarely talked about and a context which throughout history has undermined a progressive approach to that activity, even though the public regard that same context as the main authority on the activity. Is it sex in church? No, it's learning in classrooms. And the practices which promote effective learning and build classrooms as learning communities.

I write as an educator for 35 years and someone who, with a band of like-minded colleagues (Caroline Lodge, Eileen Carnell, Patsy Wagner, Caroline Whalley) noticed the way that the first Thatcherite 'reforms' in education ('National' 'Curriculum' in the main) were marginalising our interests in whole-person development through the curriculum and the whole school context. Our response to this marginalisation was to go for what we saw as the centre of what school is there for – learning. We found the centre surprisingly uninhabited, both with respect to classroom practice and with respect to the priorities of academic circles we were circulating in. The task of finding a contextual model of learning which would relate to teachers and classrooms was like finding a noodle in a haystack.

The first stage in the process of reclaiming learning is to recognize that our everyday discourse takes us away from a focus on learning and (only exacerbated by the policy context of the last 18 years) has us talk about (i) teaching, (ii) performance, and (iii) work. I have found it effective to label these three 'Space Invaders' because they take up the space we would wish to give to a focus on learning (Watkins, 2003). And rather than believe that we will

vanquish the space invaders, for it is unlikely that they will disappear, I now suggest that our task is to tame their negative influence on our professional hopes and visions.

In current times the second space invader has extra relevance. Through performance tests, performance tables, performance management government promulgates a mechanistic discourse of ‘better teaching to raise standards’. But teachers’ local experience tells them otherwise. For themselves and for their pupils they recognize the orientation which this ‘top-down’ rhetoric engenders in learners of all sorts, and the forms of strategic behaviour it calls out: putting effort into limited goals, giving up when things get tough, aiming to ‘look good’ rather than to learn, and to adopt any strategy that might get a better showing in performance measures – cheating in tests, fiddling results, fixing cohorts and so on. This only replicates the sorts of strategic behaviour which have always been present in hierarchically managed performance-oriented classrooms since the classroom was invented 5,000 years ago. At that time the orthodox way to secure good grades was to bribe the teacher with food, flattery and new robes (Kramer, 1949). Nowadays evidence of the systemic effects are more widely known, including ‘administrator and teacher cheating, student cheating, exclusion of low-performance students from testing, misrepresentation of student dropout rates’ and so on (Nichols & Berliner, 2005).

A focus on learning and the range of orientations which can be called out in learners helps to resolve the issue about performance. With the summary of research evidence shown in Figure 1, teachers can hold on to the twin statements: A focus on learning enhances performance; a focus on performance can depress performance.

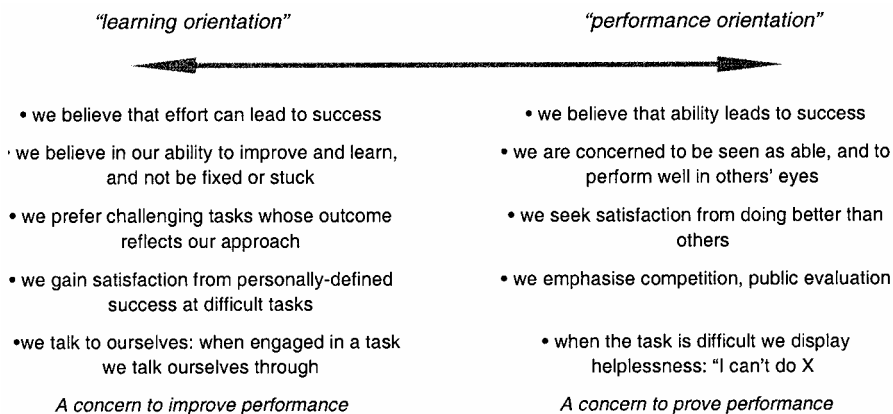


Figure 1. Learners’ orientations to learning (Watkins et al, 2002)

The creation of a performance orientation in our school system leads us once again to discuss the wider context, where I have noticed an interesting cluster of other words beginning with P:

Politicians' **P**anic over **P**erformance leads to **P**olicies which exert **P**ressure on schools, who then **P**ass it on to **P**upils. The effects are: **P**lateauing of **P**erformance **I**mprovements and **P**olarisation of the **P**upil **P**opulation, in which the **P**rivileged continue to **P**revail.

This statement regularly attracts a strong response: many people ask for copies. And it often contributes to a form of communication between teachers which is a crucial component in helping them face the endemic tensions of the job: to see the big picture (Marble et al, 2000) and to place things in a wider historical/political context. When teachers have room to think, the question 'How did we get into this mess?' is sometimes voiced. And the answers can contribute to a critical analysis and to re-empowerment of classroom teachers. But at this point an extra element is needed: the recognition that hierarchical forces may be evident but they are not all-powerful. The variation between schools and between classrooms makes this point:

Recent research on the impact of schools on student learning leads to the conclusion that 8-19 per cent of the variation in student learning outcomes lies between schools with a further amount of up to 55 per cent of the variation in individual learning outcomes between classrooms within schools. (Cuttance 1998, p. 1158)

The classroom is the influential context, and the hazard in top-down management is that it can reduce participants' capacity to self-organise (Olson, 2003) which is a crucial capacity in being an effective learner. And if top-down is also couched in mechanical terms it contributes to the de-moralisation of human services. It is fortunate that teachers' hopes and visions survive: the largest survey of teachers in England found: 'The factor which most motivated the majority to become a teacher was the wish to work with young people, and that this remained the largest factor motivating them to continue' and the biggest demotivators were unnecessary paperwork, initiative overload and a target-driven culture (GTCE, 2003).

At the local level classroom teachers' hopes and visions can be re-vitalised by simple discussion activities such as 'It's Monday morning. As you go to your classroom, what do you hope for in classroom life?'. Two things become clear: that teachers mention high-level, connected, social and intellectual elements that reflect the complexity of the classroom and its operation as a community; and that this sort of discussion can be a surprise. As Ruth, who had been teaching for five years, said: 'I'm amazed at this discussion because it has identified many things which are important to me, but I have not talked about them in the last five years'. Similarly at the organisational level, teachers' hopes and visions are crucial in moving from a mechanical factory workforce model to a learning and relationships view of school (Watkins, 2004a).

By this point three main elements in reclaiming learning have been identified: name the silence, engage teachers' local knowledge, and steer clear of

collusion with hierarchy. But the role of evidence has been hinted at and deserves further mention.

Evidence is important, and the forms of evidence which are deemed relevant are equally important. Reviews of academic research are an element, but not enough. The obsessive focus on performances in narrow forms of testing, and the awful idea of accountability (Hoskin, 1996) can lead teachers to downgrade the lived evidence in front of them: when they start to focus on learning in their classrooms student engagement and motivation improves, high-level thinking increases and pupils' view of learning is enriched. When they start to operate their classrooms as a learning community, dialogue deepens, behaviour and social development improve (Watkins 2004b, 2005). In both cases, if they can hold off the pressures to rush into testing, performance improves.

Evidence is important in teachers' process of reclaiming learning, but it is not enough to initiate experiments in practice. Two other elements are needed at the early stage: spotting ideologies and spotting the voice of fear. Teachers do need some support in voicing the fact that government interventions are couched in mechanical terms (Wrigley, 2000) which imply that improvement comes from compliance. Increased centralisation and specification go hand-in-hand, and rely on simplistic views of classrooms (Watkins, 2002) and of learning: 'learning = being taught'. So teaching more and faster and harder will improve results – ha! Teachers know better than this from their classroom experience, their knowledge of pupils and their knowledge of their own learning. But all too often they live that knowledge in a way that is submerged below the rhetoric of compliance and managerialism.

There are two motivators for bringing that submerged teacher knowledge to the surface: human exchange and naming the elephant. Human engagement is high at the point when we exchange stories of experience, and teachers colonise the few opportunities they get for this. The concept of naming the elephant refers to a group of people talking in a room where there is also an elephant – but no-one mentions it. This situation usually reflects a climate of fear and poor communication (Hammond and Mayfield, 2004) which can have disastrous consequences (see, for example, the enquiry into the Shuttle disaster). The elephant is fear and it deserves to be named as such so that it may be analysed and tamed. Narrative work helps us see that the voice of fear does its life-negating work through exaggeration, over-stating each of the likelihoods of 'you'll get caught' and 'it will be dreadful' (Wagner & Watkins, 2005). On closer inspection, most teachers find that neither of these occur much, which confirms the evidence that 90 per cent of human fears do not eventuate (Jeffers, 1997). But the climate of bullying has created fear and if teachers are to regain professional confidence (the ability to continue acting according to your principles while in the presence of the voice of fear) a better direction needs to be found.

Fear acts in the service of compliance, and this needs to be exposed. Brighouse (1998) helpfully described four key elements in the approach to

change which is about ensuring compliance: (i) Decide what is right (ii) Promulgate single solutions (iii) Regulate and inspect (iv) Punish in public deviants and delinquents. But successful schools are not compliant organisations. In a study of 78 schools, Rosenholtz (1991) found evidence to divide her sample into 'moving schools' and 'stuck schools' on a range of indicators. Her survey of teachers included the question: 'Do you ever have to do things that are against the rules in order to do what's best for your students?'. In moving schools 79 per cent answered 'Yes'. In stuck schools 75 per cent answered 'No'. More recently an HMI survey of primary schools deemed successful (Ofsted, 2002) showed that their curriculum was linked across subjects, used themes for planning, strongly emphasised humanities and arts, and encouraged pupils to value learning for its own sake – hardly the picture that is promulgated by the purveyors of compliance, and its associated enemy of learning, consistency ('Consistency requires you to be as ignorant today as you were a year ago' [Berenson, 1892]). Variation is a key ingredient for learning, and these points help us to maintain a sceptical view of any account of the education system which portrays it as a single story.

An alternative approach to change is 'appreciative inquiry', in which the principles include:

People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known). If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past. (Hammond, 2000)

In practical terms, appreciative inquiries help to identify occasions when events went well, how they managed to be created, and what can be taken forward from them. One example is to have teachers identify occasions when learning was at its best in a classroom, what led it to be so, how that situation occurred, and what we can derive from it. Having been through this process on many occasions with many teachers (and also pupils), the first three principles for promoting effective learning are reaffirmed: it is active, collaborative, and learner-driven. The fourth, learning about learning, emerges less strongly (Watkins et al, 2006).

Appreciative enquiry can help us learn about and develop an individual's position in the current climate. Teachers may be surrounded by invitations to compliance, but they do not always take them up, and the best of these occasions can highlight narratives of principle. When inviting teachers to identify the resources they call on not to take up invitations to compliance, the accounts from their professional history, heritage, family and other experience give important voice to matters of personal integrity and community value. It also affirms the important sense in which change is local. As an adjunct, it can be illuminating to analyse those occasions when we have been recruited into practices of which we disapprove, although this process does not produce as many positive directions from lived experience.

A final optional element in the process of reclaiming is to hold a discussion which speculates on what might happen if the devices imposed on education were applied to government itself. For example:

- any school whose membership dropped by 50 per cent, as New Labour's has, would have its future questioned
- any manager who missed the majority of his self-made targets year-on-year, as New Labour education ministers have, would not be credible
- any body that wantonly denied the social nature of its actions and effects, as New Labour has by its adherence to tests, tables and bullying, and shows no signs of remorse, would be a candidate for an ASBO (Anti-Social Behaviour Order).

The hypocrisy of the climate is exposed, and this can make an additional contribution to professionals reclaiming agency. The term 'agency' is little used and not well understood. It describes key human capacities: the power to make a difference, the ability to act intentionally, the making of choices and the monitoring of actions and their effects (Dietz & Burns, 1992). Such capacities are active in any effective learner, and have also been identified in analyses of expert teachers (Berliner, 2001).

Perhaps it is appropriate to end with the voice of teachers: a few of the written comments from colleagues on a one-day course in Suffolk which utilised some of the practices described in this article, and whose comments suggest to me their ability to reclaiming agency in the face of the current climate:

'Thought provoking and encouraging. It has given me courage to continue to take 'risks' in the classroom, developing learning situations.'

'Excellent opportunities for sharing ideas and challenging current practice.'

'Exploded some myths! I'm full of ideas for the future.'

'An excellent and thought provoking day, it should be required 'reading' for Government and Local Authority Advisers.'

Closing Thought

Reclaiming learning involves addressing the dynamics between teachers and their environment, more so nowadays than one might prefer. It is essential if the scripts of classrooms are to be changed for them to promote effective learning in the 21st century. Dainton (2005) has ably outlined what is needed for teachers' voices to be reclaimed in the wider context. At that level much needs to be done to reclaim moral and ethical standards at a time when market forces have unprecedented power, and return the teaching profession from its current misaligned state (Gardner et al, 2001).

At the local level, the task may be more manageable. Learning is local, and a focus on learning makes the process more likely to engage teachers and pupils mutually, in a co-creation.

Teachers can elicit student voices. And teachers can, in the process, be led to discover their own voices. One cannot happen without the other, but happily the achievement of voice is mutual, and teachers who help students to find student voices will discover that their own voices are clearer and stronger in the process. (Lincoln, 1995, p. 93)

This account has tried to map out some strategies and experiences. They are not a formula but a map (see Figure 2) across which many routes are possible, during which some places may need to be revisited.

Some teachers wonder whether this project is deliberately subversive, for the effects may sometimes be so. But that is not the main intention. Being deliberately subversive would involve a mis-direction of energies and would be organised by the wrong values. Instead, the project is a contribution to populating the otherwise empty centre of our school system. In that sense it goes to the 'root' (radical) and is an act of the activist professional (Sachs, 2000) who can be described in both senses as a learning teacher.

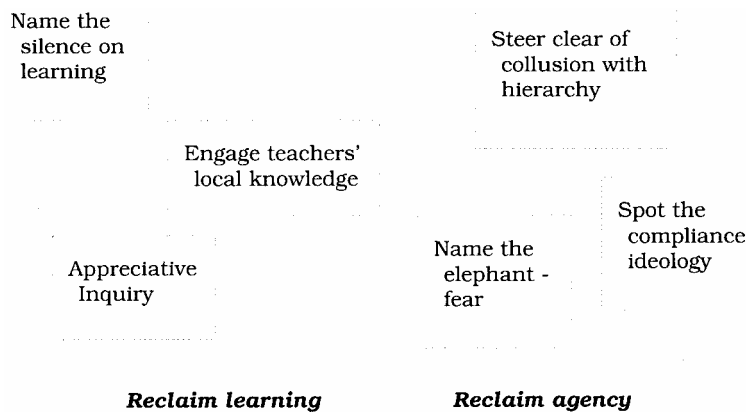


Figure 2. A map of the themes when teachers reclaim learning

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