
Learning Futures: rebuilding curriculum and pedagogy around student engagement

DAVID PRICE

ABSTRACT The author discusses the Learning Futures programme, a partnership set up between the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Innovation Unit. The two organisations had previously worked together on the Musical Futures project that had involved radical new approaches to teaching and learning in secondary school music.

Introduction

The Learning Futures programme was set up in 2008, a partnership between the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Innovation Unit. The two organisations had previously worked together on the Musical Futures project, successfully documenting and scaling up radical new approaches to teaching and learning in secondary school music.

The principles and practices which informed Musical Futures [1] have broadly shaped the design and development of Learning Futures. Our learning community (15 practice development 'sites' comprising 40 schools, plus a growing 'community of engagement' of schools, testing out tools and resources) is committed to finding new ways to make secondary stage learning more engaging and effective.

The tools and resources, created in partnership with Learning Futures schools, will be made freely available to schools and educators during 2011.

Programme Rationale

We are in a position where we have to create engaging work for kids or we're going to lose the battle for their hearts and minds. We

have to be intentional about engagement.
(Phillip Schlechty Centre for Engagement)

Learning Futures has made student engagement the prime focus of activities. In this we are not alone. Around the world, more attention is being paid to finding ways to tap into students' interest in learning. The reasons are not hard to find. Whilst the past decade has seen an overall improvement in standardised test scores, more recently the upward performance trend has stalled. Furthermore, it is widely felt that the tough accountability framework, which has been at the centre of all policy initiatives, has largely served to exacerbate student disengagement.

The irony, for commentators like Alfie Kohn, is that invariably, 'when interest appears, achievement usually follows' (2000, p. 128). Until recently, however, how teaching and learning actually happens and the importance of engagement and motivation were rarely of interest, just so long as results improved. We believe this is not simply a short-sighted strategy; it has fundamentally distorted the purpose of schooling.

The reasons behind disengagement are varied and complex, involving a host of social, familial and personal factors: poverty, low aspirations, mental and physical wellbeing, environmental and community factors, parental attitudes, etc. There are clear links between these factors and disengagement. However, discussions about disengagement rarely give prominence to the young person's response to what is offered in school. It is almost as though we have accepted the inevitability of learning as a cold shower: you're not expected to enjoy it, but it will do you good.

The focus upon trying to remedy the ill effects of disadvantage, through early intervention strategies, for example, is understandable and important. But it tends to concentrate upon the visibly disengaged: persistent truants, those with special educational or emotional needs, those with behaviour problems. However, as Sodha & Guglielmi (2009) note in a recent study, 'looking simply at active signs of disengagement would underestimate the extent of disengagement among children and young people who passively withdraw from their education, by withdrawing cognitively or emotionally'.

Disengagement is an urgent priority, too, for the 'passively withdrawn': the considerably larger number whose disengagement is less visible, but no less acute. Additionally, there is often a false connection made between achievement and engagement. We have recently seen a large number of students becoming disengaged achievers, performing well academically, keeping out of trouble, but rejecting further and higher education.

What Do We Mean By Engagement?

Much of the discourse ... has been about disengagement on adult terms; engagement as defined by politicians, policy makers, and perhaps some teachers and parents. But tackling disengagement

effectively means taking the time to understand what children and young people themselves find engaging ... placing student voice at the centre of what they do. (Sodha & Guglielmi, 2009, p. 25)

Identifying and measuring engagement is often fraught with difficulty. A multitude of studies testify to the often confusing and overlapping nature of definitions. Despite this, in recent years, a consensus has emerged on the conceptual basis of engagement. Three elements, initially viewed in isolation, but recently seen more holistically, have become widely accepted:

- Thinking/Cognitive;
- Feeling/Emotional/Affective;
- Acting/Behavioural/Operative.

Variants to this exist, but there is agreement around models that seek to identify and measure how students think, feel and act in school.

The three-legged stool model most commonly adopted (cognitive, emotional and behavioural) is geared around directing the question, 'Are you engaged?' to the student only. Our belief, from the outset, has been that we are only likely to see deep, authentic and motivated learning when the responsibility for engagement lies with a broader set of partners, all seeking to support learning – a 'done with', rather than 'done to' approach. We need to aim not only for engaged students, but also for engaged *schools*.

A second problem with the traditional model of engagement stems from its predominantly instrumental applications: engagement as a vehicle to improve student performance or discipline within school. Inevitably, such a mindset constrains success indicators within a compliance model. Students are deemed to be engaged, for example, when/if they:

- attend regularly;
- conform to behavioural norms;
- complete work in the manner requested and on time;
- are 'on task';
- respond to questioning.

If we have greater aspirations for students – beyond compliance and toward a commitment to lifelong learning – then the conventional concept of engagement is inadequate.

Reframing Engagement

If you're not given the opportunity to do something, you kind of feel that there's no point, because it wasn't your choice. ... If you're not given a say, then you kind of feel invalid ... I think that a lot of students would feel that kind of breaks their confidence as well.

(Learning Futures student)

Our working definition of deep engagement, developed in consultation with our students, is that it is learning which occurs when the learner:

- cares not just about the *outcome*, but also the *development*, of their learning;
- takes *responsibility* for their learning;
- brings discretionary *energy* to their learning task(s);
- can locate the *value* of their learning beyond school, and wishes to *prolong* their learning beyond school hours.

If these are the learner dispositions we strive for, what then are the keys that can trigger deep engagement and motivation? By examining the designs for learning in our partner schools (in both curriculum and pedagogy), we have observed deep engagement when one or more of the following characteristics is built into the experience. That is to say, where learning is:

- *Placed*: it reaches, and has relevance to, students in the space that they inhabit, connecting with the student's family/community and interests outside school;
- *Purposeful*: it absorbs the student in actions of practical or intellectual value, fosters a sense of value and agency, and invites students to behave as proto-professionals;
- *Pervasive*: it extends beyond examinations, is supported by family and peers, and can be extended through independent (and interdependent) informal learning;
- *Principled*: it appeals to the student's passions or moral purpose – it matters to students.

Our schools have found the above to be a useful checklist when designing projects for engagement, but it soon became apparent that a school that is intentional about student engagement must itself become engaged – with its parents, local businesses and community. For many, this has proven to be a tougher concept to frame, but in our most recent pamphlet, 'Engaging Schools' (2010b), we highlighted four approaches which promote school engagement:

School as base camp. A genuine twenty-first-century school should be a base camp rather than a single destination – a place where students meet to explore learning opportunities that take them into their communities, onto the Web, and to local businesses and employers. It should also be a hub that creates connections with families, and with learning partners beyond school.

Enquiry-based learning. Enquiry in Learning Futures draws on two pedagogical methods:

- Enquiry-based learning (EBL): seeking out and evaluating information in order to answer open-ended questions and solve open-ended problems;

- Project-based learning (PBL): carrying out an extended project that produces a tangible output.

It has become clear that these two methods are enhanced by being combined: enquiry is most powerful when it is part of a project with tangible results, while students learn most from projects that are propelled by open (but scaffolded) enquiry.

Extending learning relationships. Radically expanding the range of people building learning relationships with students, to include the roles of teacher/expert/mentor/coach, and incorporating more malleable strategies for supporting students, involving parents, other adults, peers and near-to-peers.

School as learning commons. The school becomes an open, shared, space which everyone can contribute to, and everyone takes responsibility for learning. In Learning Futures schools we see three interrelated cultures present:

- a culture of collaborative enquiry;
- a culture of co-construction;
- a culture of democratic community.

Having observed these four approaches, clear links emerged between the principles of student engagement and the approaches of schools seeking to become engaged themselves, as seen in Figure 1.

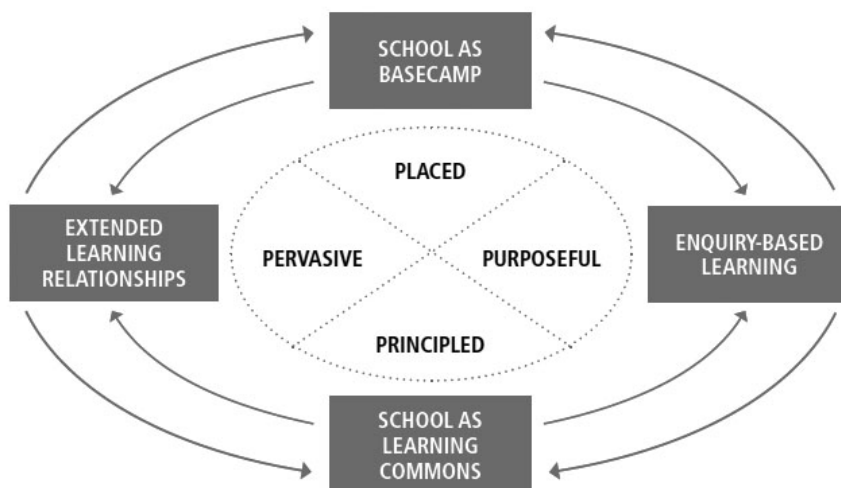


Figure 1.

Engagement in Practice

So much for the theory – what are the changes in practice that involvement in the Learning Futures programme has brought to participating schools? What pedagogical conditions are needed? How does it impact upon curriculum? It is, perhaps, better to let the schools tell the story of their innovations in their own words, through extracts from their postings on the Learning Futures blog:

Harris Federation – School as Learning Commons

At the beginning of the year, we changed our KS3 curriculum so that most subjects are experienced through cross curricular enquiry projects that deal with a ‘big question’ as a starting point. And now that the pupils have really grasped the concepts of co-construction and learning outside of the curriculum, we’ve made it even more ‘student led’ in that pupils are expected to go much deeper in to a reflective and evaluative process at the end of the unit by describing their thoughts, feelings and experiences to the rest of the year group in presentations that they largely organise themselves. There’s also a bit of salesmanship involved as pupils usually want to persuade their peers to opt for the unit they’ve just completed!

A group of over 100 students and staff at the Harris Federation of South London Schools have conducted a major enquiry into teaching and learning methods, over two years. The Harris Executive have committed to implementing their findings in creating innovative and engaging curriculum and pedagogy. Students have been interviewing experts on learning, speaking to other students across the globe (via a Skype-enabled overnight ‘learn-over’), and visiting innovative schools in Britain and the US.

Students and teachers are collaborating on pilot projects. Here is what one teacher (at Harris Academy Merton) has had to say about two of the projects:

Peer Mentoring. The Student Commission assisted with setting the direction and agreeing the outcomes on this project, which arose from an identified need to give some students the tools to be more successful in the classroom.

Staff–Student Collaborative Teaching. Commissioners were keen to be able to demonstrate their impact in the classroom in the area of Teaching and Learning. Accordingly, they set up a programme which has students planning and delivering lessons in partnership with teachers, and observing and evaluating lessons, feeding back to planners.

The peer mentoring scheme has produced impressive results. Students apply to be mentors and take part in a rigorous interview process; staff nominate mentees; mentoring sessions are weekly; mentors meet as a group fortnightly to share learning. The early impact is evidence in extracts from the data summary:

- Year 7 boy – 6 negative entries, 1 positive in the 3 weeks prior to mentoring, 8 positive entries, zero negative in 3 weeks since (Mentor: Year 9 girl)
- Year 8 boy – suffering from OCD has stopped certain daily rituals since being supported (Mentor Year 12 girl)
- Year 9 boy – history of persistent disruptive behaviour prior to mentoring – zero negative entries since (Mentor: Year 12 boy)

Students in the Harris Academy South Norwood are working with staff in the academy's Monitoring, Evaluation & Review process, designed to foster curriculum improvement. Students observe staff teaching and provide written feedback on how to further improve learning.

In 'Faculty Fridays' student commissioners are asked to research what aspects of pedagogy appear to have the most impact upon student engagement in whole day enquiry projects. Students identified the following key factors: immersive learning; use of multimedia, enterprise, practical learning and links to 'everyday life'.

Matthew Moss High School: school as basecamp

Four girls are going to scale the Old Man of Coniston. They have booked the mini bus and driver, raised money to pay for a guide, and have booked him over the phone. They are now learning about mountain safety and the geology of the Old Man. They have come up with an inspirational challenge for themselves and have negotiated matched-funding with the school Business Manager and consulted with a PE teacher about risk assessment. They are exhibiting so much more agency, independence, confidence and fundamental nous than a traditionally-taught Year 7 group would, but why take the foot off the gas? Why not see how much daylight we can create between themselves and their traditionally-taught colleagues?

*Biddenham International School:
school as basecamp / extending learning relationships*

Biddenham International School have been working with Good Things Ltd, a local business, to ensure their Learning Futures work – called 'The Project' – is appropriately placed for both their mainstream and home-educated students. Both sets of students undertake most of their project work outside the classroom and all are encouraged to find 'community experts' to help with their areas of enquiry.

For home-educated students learning in the community has been the norm, but through 'The Project' they are encouraged to engage with people other than their usual educators. One home-educated student tackled the question 'What do children with special educational needs get from horse riding

(and how can this be improved)?' by designing and delivering activities for Elizabeth Curtis Centre for Riding for the Disabled. The centre has made changes to their classes as a result of her project. Another student addressed the question 'What factors make a competitive dinghy sailor successful?' through extensive research with the Olympic dinghy sailing team. His results have been taken on board by the team's coach. In all of these cases the home-educated children benefited from their freedom from the constraints of the school day. Mainstream Biddenham students also began talking about their learning as taking place outside of the classroom – neighbours and aunties featured high on the list of people helping the students to access the information and cultivate skills they needed to complete their enquiries.

Villiers High School: enquiry-based learning

Year 7 pupils at Villiers have, for this term's Enquiry Based Learning Project, been exploring the question 'Is it always better to be rich than poor?'

Just before Christmas when it was all the teachers could do to muster up the energy to turn up for work, the key stage 3 pupils, energetic to the end, put on polished drama performances, dressed in costumes, made videos, played instruments and, of course, slaved over a hot stove to make a hearty soup to warm up visitors attending the end of term EBL exhibitions in the cold, wintry weather.

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Matthew Moss High School: enquiry-based learning

In the Autumn of 1066, Harold Godwineson had to get an army together at Stamford Bridge to fight the Vikings and then force march 250 miles, post-haste, to confront the Normans at Hastings. Similarly, the staff at Matthew Moss High School held the line against the disruptions caused by the BSF work underway (hammering, electric faults triggering fire bells, leaking temporary classrooms) only for the phone call to arrive heralding an Ofsted inspection. Heavens.

And inevitably part of the inspection would consider 'My World', our Learning Futures intervention and vital territory for the future of our learning mission. What if it were lost?

And with all this in mind we plan the My World lesson that might be observed, using the principles emerging to us as of real value. And the stimulus for the double lesson ends up reading thus:

By 10.30 a.m. you must have produced the best, most complex and detailed information poster about 'Islands in the Pacific Ocean' ever made, following these rules:

- Work in a three of your own choosing
- Each three can use only one computer
- No printing is allowed
- Writing tasks must be shared amongst the group
- No copying word for word from the computer or other groups

Keep letting other people in your group know how they are doing, but you can only do this by giving them Post-Its with both positive comments about how they are learning and suggestions about how they might improve. There will be times when you are asked to stop and do this as a whole class also.

The 10.30 a.m. deadline is fixed and firm. So come on then let's get in threes and get thinking!

How many islands are there in the Pacific? What kind of rock is most common and why? How is the Pacific Ocean different from other oceans? Would you find any rubbish in the sea around an island in the Pacific? Who lives on islands in the Pacific? What is the earliest history we know about these islands? How many islands have no-one living on them? Which is the closest Pacific island to the UK and which is the furthest away? Find the Latin names of three fish common in the seas around Pacific islands? What do these names mean? ...

And then it is observed, at length, by an inspector and then the pressure between the old and new paradigms becomes almost unbearable. Every fearful instinct is pushing the Learning Support Assistant and Teacher to intervene, to tell them what to do, to look overtly and traditionally busy, to direct and instruct. It is so, so hard to hold the line and concentrate on letting that old behaviour go and keeping immersed in the application of the new skill-set of provocation, of supplying questions rather than answers, of relentlessly leading learners towards the thinking that will help them define the ideas and further questions they need.

And then the peer-reviewing via Post-It is not as sophisticated as hoped, so the class is stopped for a 20 second self-review, a mark out of 10 on a Post-It with explanation and then all called to the front, to stand together for a good sharing and review of learning.

And at this critical moment of reveal ... the inspector leaves and misses their mature, composed, honest and reflective feedback, at least half the value of the whole undertaking.

And he can't offer feedback before lunchtime ...

Did he get it? Did he see the muddle and failure (because there was plenty) without seeing the successes. Did he see the flow of quiet learning conversation, provocation and challenge in the room and if he did, did he value these less-directive and more mentoring-like interactions?

It wasn't pliancy we were after (What good is that?) but a careful and considered observation, undistracted by the relative unorthodoxy of the practice, of what learning was actually taking place. A disapproving judgement would not mean that we are all wrong (we know that we are not): it would, however, mean an even more difficult journey as we seek to evolve and convince.

But at the end of the day, the lesson based on the principles of Learning Futures and what we all believe in and what we all know, got a Grade 1. Outstanding.

Conclusion

From our starting point – of seeking to enhance learner engagement, whilst also improving student outcomes – we have seen Learning Futures schools devise a wide range of curricular interventions, with varying degrees of success, as is always the way with attempts to innovate. During 2011 we will work with a smaller number of schools, who are blending all four approaches (School as Base Camp, Extending Learning Relationships, School as Learning Commons and Enquiry-Based Learning), to identify the necessary organisational conditions – ways in which space, time, place, and professional development can be configured to create a more engaging learning environment. However, we have already seen a number of consistent pedagogic requirements emerge.

Pedagogic Conditions for Engagement

Of prime importance, perhaps, is the inescapable requisite of a productive, mutually respectful *relationship between learner and significant adult* (the term teacher is incomplete in a context where mentors, community experts or project commissioners may also have a close relationship with the student). In interviews with students at our partner schools, there was a strong correlation between enjoyment of learning and strong adult relationships. Being known by a teacher – no mean feat in a high school of over 1500 students – had a clear impact on student attitudes about learning. Students identified qualities such as trust, affirmation and challenge as key aspects in building their engagement and commitment.

While project-based learning and activities that go beyond school can be liberating for staff and students, it is important that activities incorporate a sense of *bounded freedom* – that students are given a clear set of guidelines, procedures or protocols within which they can make choices. As one Year 9 student put it: 'I'd like to have a little bit more of a say, but ... I think you need the teacher there to sort of guide you'.

Our students are highly vocal about the importance of hands-on, active learning. At the heart of such experiences is the promotion of *practical, scaffolded inquiry*. Here the concept of reverse engineering can be helpful. By starting at the end – with what students would need to have done, or what knowledge they would need to have acquired – a series of learning challenges can be designed, within which students can be free to explore and learn from their mistakes.

The fourth condition becoming apparent is for teachers to have a *flexible repertoire of classroom strategies and 'ways of being'*, which include coaching and mentoring colleagues, coupled with a shared commitment to *teachers as collaborative learners*. Most schools, ironically, tend to be 'learning enclosures'. External pressures and embedded structural conditions – the privacy of the classroom, the segregation of subject departments, the workload demands – help ensure that innovative practice often stays locked within a single teacher or department.

For too long, those who develop educational policies have viewed learner engagement as an added bonus, only considered after compliance and achievement are in place. It is our contention, however, that those students who are considered disruptive or failing – or indeed those who have achieved passively – have, more often than not, simply disengaged from the process they are being put through. We have seen many students who appear to come back to life once the learning activities presented to them reflect their passions, principles and hidden abilities. At Learning Futures, we are still trying to discover what practices are likely to trigger a transformation of students' attitudes toward learning and schooling. But already we know one thing: that having students engaged and excited about their learning is far too important to be considered a mere happy accident of schooling, and far too central to be ignored in our assessment of teaching, learning, and schools.

Note

[1] See www.musicalfutures.org for further details

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David Price

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Correspondence: davidprice@learningfutures.org