Learning without Limits: using the power of the collective to foster professional learning

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ABSTRACT In this article, members of the Learning without Limits research team describe the establishment and work of the Learning without Limits network. This network brings together practitioners, school leaders, academics and others involved in education to further develop approaches to anti-determinist pedagogy, and to consider the issues which arise.

> We urge teachers, wherever possible, to do their thinking in the company of others, seeking help, sharing complexities, supporting each other by building collective power in schools, local networks and contacts with higher education institutions. (Swann et al 2012, p. 118)

Learning without Limits is a body of research dedicated to developing approaches to teaching and learning free from the constraints imposed by fixed-ability thinking. It was, and continues to be, developed through partnerships between teachers and academics. This way of working ensures that the ideas and principles developed through the study of individual teachers and schools are rooted in authentic, real-life contexts. But sustained support is needed if a wider group of teachers and schools is to engage with, take forward and build innovatively on the insights derived from previous projects. In this article, we describe what we have been able to do, with very limited resources, to create conditions in which the kinds of professional learning needed to foster Learning without Limits can flourish.

Creating a Network

A first step was to develop a website where information about each of our projects could be found. This included a summary of key ideas arising from each project, a list of relevant publications and an area setting out other related work and research.[1] The website was a useful way of reaching out to a wider group of teachers and other educators. It was a means of making contact with fellow academics whose own research and ways of working with teachers align closely with ours and who got in touch with a view to future collaboration. And it enabled us to have a presence and make contacts internationally. For example, a head teacher of a secondary school in Norway found the website and contacted us, requesting support for the whole staff in using Learning without Limits ideas and principles to develop their thinking and practices. This partnership began with the staff flying to Cambridge for a two-day professional learning visit. It was followed by a year of support, at a distance, for all staff, including intensive written dialogue between ourselves and a self-selected group of teachers. It culminated in a day of reflection led by members of our research team and a pack of activities written by us to help sustain a culture of learning beyond the formal end of the project.

However, while the website was important as a first point of contact, it was insufficient in itself to provide support for the steady stream of teachers and schools who, with limited funds, contacted us requesting help of a more direct and personalised kind. They wanted our support in exploring the core ideas and principles, and how the pedagogical model we had developed (Hart et al, 2004, p. 179) might be adapted to their own settings. Most were not requesting – nor were we in a position to provide – intensive support on the scale of work with the Norway school. So what could we do to respond positively to all those who contacted us? The idea of building a Learning without Limits network emerged.

The value of a network, first and foremost, would be to put teachers and other educators working in different settings in touch with one another so that they could build their own connections and learn from one another. Building a network would be a way of creating a sense of professional community, offering its members strength and confidence from knowing that there were other like-minded people out there with similar concerns and purposes, who were attempting to work along similar lines. People frequently expressed a need for help in holding on to valued principles in an increasingly hostile policy context. Schools were being repeatedly advised to adopt forms of grouping by supposed ability as a strategy for raising attainment. Curriculum documents and assessment procedures were predicated on views of the child, of learning, of teachers and of teaching, which were deeply antithetical to Learning without Limits ideas. People needed to hear about the ways that others were finding to resist pressures and manage expectations in the current climate. They needed support from each other in maintaining their conviction that another way was possible, and indeed in discovering *how* it was being made possible in each situation.

From our point of view, the drive to establish a network also had an additional purpose, one connected to research. We, the Learning without Limits research group [2], have always been keenly aware of the need to treat the ideas arising from the various projects as provisional lest they ossify into a new orthodoxy or come to be seen as a set of practices that can be copied and imported wholesale into any classroom anywhere. We are also aware that our work rests on a very narrow evidence base (nine teachers in different schools, and the staff of one primary school and one secondary school), so contacts with a further group of teachers and other educators working with the ideas in practice would offer us an invaluable opportunity to extend our evidence base, through working with them, alongside them, learning together from their successes and, more crucially, from the challenges they face in bridging what can be a divide between published theory and practice. This kind of detailed review and development work can only be undertaken in partnerships with practitioners.

The Need for Face-to-Face Contact

To establish personal contacts and lay the foundations for the growth of the professional community that would be supported by the network, we decided to offer a termly seminar to which would be invited all those who had previously contacted us requesting support. In our planning, we knew that the seminars should emphatically not be a forum for us, academics, to tell teachers and school leaders 'how to do it' or to offer them solutions to problems. As we emphasised in our account of school-wide development work at The Wroxham School:

> There is no short cut; all teachers have to do their own thinking and arrive at their own understandings in order to make transforming choices for the children in their classrooms. (Swann et al, 2012, p. 116)

However, the study of Wroxham also served to underline what we knew from previous experience of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses – that thinking done collectively has a power above and beyond what teachers can achieve alone. Our role in planning the seminars would be to provide time and space for people to come together to do their thinking face to face: to hear what was going on in settings other than their own and to explore and discuss key Learning without Limits ideas and principles in a focused, manageable, yet open-ended way.

So in the first few seminars, discussion was focused around one key idea or pedagogical principle – for example, 'trust' or 'co-agency' or 'the ethic of everybody'. We provided activities and resources to stimulate thinking and encourage people to share how they were embodying the key idea or principle in practice in their own settings. For the third and subsequent seminars, people were also offered a preparatory task, inviting them to do some thinking prior to the seminar, as a way of enabling them to engage more deeply in critical

thinking when sharing ideas during the seminar. For example, they were given a choice of four relevant articles to read and comment on prior to presenting their thoughts, at the seminar, to people who had focused on different articles. Some people found the articles so pertinent to their concerns that they read all four. Others also read them with a group of interested colleagues back in school. Sometimes separate tasks were offered to school leaders and class teachers, so that everybody had a chance to reflect on practices relevant to their role.

From the outset we have debated how much guidance and steering should be provided up front at each seminar from members of the academic group. On the one hand, we strongly believed in people's capacity to learn through dialogue with one another and were keen to avoid casting ourselves as 'experts'. On the other hand, we were assured by some participants at the seminars that an important reason for coming was to deepen and enrich their thinking through engagement with ideas presented by members of the academic group. Therefore, we sought to achieve a balance between discussion time in small groups, and providing single sustained contributions as academics around key issues relevant to the theme of the seminar. To emphasise that expertise was, of course, distributed throughout the professional community, we also invited sustained contributions from members of the seminar group, who described to participants some innovative development work or research that they were undertaking. For example, a deputy head (now headteacher) of a primary school talked about her after-school 'tea and chat' sessions at which attendance was completely voluntary yet most staff members came along willingly because they found the space to think and talk about learning as a staff group useful, even inspiring. An academic colleague talked about observational research she had undertaken in a primary school which no longer officially practised ability grouping, yet the ideas persisted in teachers' communications with children. She was quick to point out that this was not to imply that the teachers were at fault – rather, it showed how deep the legacy of ability thinking runs in schools, as in society generally. It was so important, she continued, to give teachers time and space to reflect together if freedom from ability thinking is to become a reality. In her book about the research, she writes:

> It is by drawing attention to assumptions underlying practices that
> we begin to understand where and how change needs to be
> directed.... Change needs to go far deeper than a surface change to
> structural practices. (Marks, 2013, p. 42)

To help people do the necessary but challenging work of digging below the surface and articulating the 'why' of existing practices, we also provided opportunities for them to engage collaboratively with related ideas and theories from the broader academic evidence base. We held seminars, for example, on 'the language of ability', on 'open-ended learning' and on 'time'. We offered participants relevant research articles and chapters to read and discuss. This was partly to enrich and strengthen their confidence in, and strengthen their

confidence in this 'other way' of working and partly to review and deepen their understanding of how classroom conditions impact on each child's learning capacity, and what they can do to identify barriers to learning and to enrich and enhance opportunities for learning for everybody. It also contributed to the ongoing development of a vocabulary on which people could draw when describing and explaining the principle and purpose (*why*) behind structures and practices in their classrooms and schools.

Although we developed this format for the seminars in stages, and often intuitively, on reflection we can see that the kinds of activities we chose to engage in do in fact reflect core Learning without Limits principles (co-agency, trust and the ethic of everybody). They assume that teachers and other educators are active thinkers who are in control of their learning and who learn not through diktat but through dialogue ('co-agency'). The activities assume that people will find meaning in worthwhile activities and when engaging with the ideas of others as part of a creative learning process ('trust'). They assume that everybody has a contribution to make and that the contribution of everybody is equally important ('the ethic of everybody'). As well as guiding our planning, these principles were also useful in retrospect, as we evaluated what had happened and made any necessary adjustments. For example, had we got the balance right between talk in groups and input from others, including ourselves (co-agency)? Why did activities sometimes not provoke the discussion that we intended (trust)? Had we given adequate thought to our grouping strategies and/or preparatory tasks to make sure that they took adequately into account people's different roles (the ethic of everybody)?

Looking back over the seminars organised so far, we realise that discussions and activities were also designed to nurture and strengthen the distinctive kinds of professional thinking (or 'dispositions') that we knew, from our study of The Wroxham School (Swann et al, 2013, p. 88), to be essential to the task of developing learning without limits. Essential dispositions include, for instance, 'openness' to different ways of interpreting key ideas and to learning from others; 'questioning' the 'why' of classroom decision-making and subjecting the findings of research to careful scrutiny; 'inventiveness', because educators often need to exercise imagination to create new practices, to respond to each child, in the moment, in all their uniqueness; and 'empathy', because educators see more, and differently, when they try to imagine the world through others' eyes.

Unlike Wroxham, where the strength of the professional community, we noted, lay in a growing consensus and cohesiveness, the potential strength of our professional collective lies in its great diversity. The people who regularly come to the seminars include school leaders and senior teachers in primary and secondary schools in different parts of the UK, experienced classroom teachers, young teachers just starting their career, students, academics, people engaged in consultancy work with schools and, latterly, teachers from other countries. Indeed, people often travel impressive distances in order to be there. An academic colleague from Germany has twice attended seminars, on one occasion

bringing three of her trainee teachers with her. Two academic colleagues, also from Germany, not only attended a seminar but made a presentation about their current research and how it linked to Learning without Limits ideas. What better way could there be to develop dispositions of openness, questioning, empathy or inventiveness than having the opportunity to share ideas and explain practices with people engaging in similar kinds of thinking yet whose professional background and experience is very different from your own?

Next Steps

Despite the potential power created by this diversity, however, there has been concern in the organising group for some time that the gaps between seminars were perhaps too long to maintain continuity in thinking and in relationships, even for the people who came regularly. Since it was impractical to suggest that busy teachers might attend more than one seminar a term, people were encouraged to use the network in between seminars to sustain contact. Members of the core group did indeed begin to forge relationships and a number made arrangements to visit each other's schools. We understand from German colleagues that, prompted by the network, they too had visited one another's universities and explored possibilities for working more closely together.

However, the problem of continuity was compounded by our commitment to the principle that everybody who requested a place was welcome to come to seminars. This principled approach created a dilemma for our planning, since we never knew who would be coming and how familiar any new people would be with Learning without Limits core ideas and principles. It imposed a limitation on the depth of thinking which it was possible to achieve in just a few hours, even with a carefully chosen preparatory task, given that people needed to use some of the scarce time available just to re-establish relationships and catch up on what had been happening since they last met.

We will, of course, involve the seminar participants in working out how to address these issues and deciding how to further develop the network from this point on. However, a suggestion that we will put to the next seminar is that members of the core group who volunteer to do so might use Learning without Limits ideas and principles as a framework for more sustained reflection and development work, ideally with colleagues in their own settings or between schools. They would then feed back to the seminar group how things were progressing at subsequent meetings. Approaching the task in this way would provide for continuity and growth of ideas between seminars and also create an opportunity for deeper, more sustained thinking for the people who volunteer, in school with colleagues and at the seminar. It would mean that everyone attending the seminars would be able to hear about concrete, practical development work taking place in schools – which people have agreed is an important priority – while bearing in mind the essential proviso that practices developed in one setting cannot be applied ready-made in another.

For the future, we need to find ways to strengthen the support that the network provides and to weave more closely together what happens in the seminars with the operation of the network. It may be that the new direction suggested for the seminars, if agreed, will help us to do just that, since it will encourage collaborative development work in school, linked to ongoing discussions in the seminars. It will help demonstrate and elucidate the many different ways of strengthening and sustaining a Learning without Limits approach. As we acknowledged in the conclusion to our account of developments at The Wroxham School (Swann et al, 2012, p. 115):

> Perhaps the most important message other teachers can draw from
> the Wroxham experience is that there is no one way, and certainly
> no right way to develop practices free from ideas of fixed ability.

Of course, many people who would like to come to seminar meetings do not live close enough to Cambridge to do so. We hope that, in time, it will be possible to set up similar professional communities in parts of the UK more reachable by people who have not been able to join us so far. Meanwhile, it may be possible via the network for us to put people in touch with others to share ideas without physically attending seminars.

We have argued that the right kinds of support and encouragement for teachers' own thinking, ideally as part of a network, are of crucial importance to the further development of Learning without Limits ideas and principles. New ways of working are more likely to be sustained if the reasons for them – the *why* of practices – have been subjected to thorough critical examination. However, the network is not hermetically sealed from the context in which it operates. While its potential benefits are great, people return from the seminars to a social world where setting, ability grouping and ability labelling are all too common; where the ladder model of learning dominates teachers' and children's classroom experiences; where teachers' busy lives leave them little time to reflect and where professional development frequently takes the form of compliance with official orthodoxy. These countervailing pressures are a crucial part of the reason why the professional community supported by the network is so important and, equally, help to explain why thinking and learning otherwise are so difficult to sustain.

While there clearly is much still to do to realise the possibilities presented by the network, the people who attend regularly tell us that they come, nonetheless, because they find the collective energy sustaining. And they continue coming because discussion with other professionals who share their values helps to renew and strengthen their desire, their optimism and their feelings of power to make a difference to children's lives.

Note

[1] http://learningwithoutlimits.educ.cam.ac.uk/

[2] Mary Jane Drummond, formerly University of Cambridge; Susan Hart, formerly University of Cambridge; Holly Linklater, University of Edinburgh; Mandy Swann, University of Cambridge; Patrick Yarker, University of East Anglia.

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