FORUM
Volume 61, Number 1, 2019
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2019.61.1.35

'Nothing New and Shiny.' My Experience with Learning without Limits: a teacher's journey

KATIE WOODS

ABSTRACT This article offers one teacher's thoughts about how the experience of having to teach students who had been labelled and grouped by 'ability' unsettled her practice. Such 'ability' thinking runs counter to her beliefs as a teacher. The article sheds light on ways in which practice can be re-fashioned in the light of principles associated with Learning without Limits approaches.

Learning without limits ... To me, these three words mean: no end to our learning, no restrictions to who can access learning and no barriers to what we can learn.

When I joined the teaching profession 15 years ago, I was wide-eyed and ready to launch myself into teaching an irresistible menu of English combined with a dash of drama. I wasn't naive. I knew I would be teaching a heady mixture of young adults with wildly different approaches to, and opinions about, education. But I never expected that some barriers to what these young people might access would come from factors beyond their control. And at times, also beyond mine. Once I set foot in the world of teaching, I realised that the steps each child took on their school journey weren't necessarily taken along their own path. Over time, due to the systems in place, students often get an understanding of their own learning by being compared with someone else. Also, their learning can often be predetermined by data taken from their past, so that people with similar data can be grouped together. Ability labelling of any kind has always given me indigestion. It's an obstinate burn that refuses to budge despite the different justifications for, and methods of, setting, streaming and establishing judgement-laden categories for grouping-by-table.

Barriers

When I first started teaching, I couldn't understand why I felt unsettled with my timetable. The school I worked in set up groups according to ability, and, after some time, I realised that trying to fit students into predetermined boxes was getting under my skin. This was the way things had always been done, according to the staff who responded when I tentatively asked why it was done like this. But I didn't understand. Every student in my 'top set' group had different skills, as well as varying needs for me to support and challenge. Every student in my 'middle' and 'bottom' set groups likewise had different skills, with varying needs to support and challenge. Some were competent speakers; some had the flair of a professional in their creative writing; others interwove their historical knowledge into their analysis. And there was a flip side: some struggled to put their ideas onto paper; some found reading assessments much more difficult than original writing; others couldn't seem to tap into their imagination. This was true of students in every one of my sets – 'top' to 'bottom'. I taught students in the lower sets who had skills in some areas that, in my opinion, were the equal of the 'top set' students. A powerful memory about a 'bottom set' student comes to mind. After a particularly difficult lesson, he handed me a poem he had written. His emotional 'voice' and his use of imagery warranted a competition win, not just a top-set place, but, according to the Senior Management Team, his target grade, class work and behaviour didn't. I felt unsettled about limiting my students' curriculum, and hence their learning, according to the group they were placed in. It was a theme that continued.

A few years later, I experienced a school that labelled its 'alternative curriculum' group the 'M' group. It was as if that mid-alphabet letter would distract them from the other groups' labels of 'A', 'B' and 'C'. 'We can't call them "Z",' explained the Senior Management Team. 'Imagine how they'd feel about themselves...' But the students believed that's where they sat in the rankings, so what did it matter what they were called? The 'M' curriculum route limited what these students could access, with GCSEs and many other formal courses being closed to them. It affected the resources and lessons they were given. A stubborn lump in my throat forms when I reflect and realise that a strong contributing factor for some of the students placed in that newly formed category was their behaviour, and not solely consideration about their learning. Looking back, I can see that their refusal to pick up a pen might have been linked to a fear of continual failure with their writing. I can see that the student who frequently swore and verbally fought every task was bored and angry. He wanted to go to college, he told me one day, but wasn't sure if he would get a place without GCSEs, so what was the point in trying?

In light of this, I've mulled over my own schooling as an English and drama postgraduate. Judged on some Year 8 test scores and my apparent attitude to learning, I was put into top sets. I thrived in English literature, teetered in the middle of the set in science and felt out of my depth in maths. The more I was predicted to achieve a mathematical 'A' as a 'bright and able' student, the less I felt my teachers were listening to me. Lessons were too fast,

too complex, out of my reach. 'You're a clever girl, you'll pick it up,' was the answer to my plea to be moved down a set. A D grade in my mock exam meant an external tutor was summoned. I never reached that A; I felt a failure with a B.

In contrast, my ability in art was never allowed to flourish. I am rubbish at art. It must be true because, at the end of Year 9, my art teacher told me not to bother completing the end-of-year test. 'There's no point,' he said. 'It's obvious you're not going to take it at GCSE – just look at that work in your sketchbook!' There was no discussion, no collaboration – just plain fact. I couldn't do art. Therefore, I know I'm rubbish at art and shy away from any drawing or painting, even when it comes to painting the walls of my house. Students learn the category they belong to, and, as suggested by my own experiences, these categories, these labels, stay throughout life, not just throughout schooling.

Practical

After university, when I was considering what to do as a career, an opportunity to work as a learning support assistant (LSA) in my previous middle school came up. Part of my job was to support students to engage more actively and participate in their lessons – helping to remove physical, learning or emotional barriers. I saw many different approaches to teaching during that year: lecturer, facilitator, chalk-and-talker. As it dawned on me that I wanted to become a teacher, I knew that I wanted to focus on the students first – just like I did in that job. The curriculum and my subjects were the flesh, but if the core wasn't nurtured – as I'd witnessed and experienced – if the student wasn't open to learning, engaged, challenged and supported, then the flesh would simply fall away.

I was introduced to the University of Cambridge Learning without Limits Study two years ago. It has given my initial beliefs theoretical grounding, and prompted me to find out if it's possible, in our educational climate, to remove 'ability' not just from our vocabulary, but from our practice and mindset. I was introduced to this study at a time when I felt I wanted more out of my teaching. I was also feeling uncomfortable with some of the discussions around how to assess students after the removal of National Curriculum levels. Our school was open to a variety of different ideas, but the labels of 'beyond expectation' and 'expected more', imported from other settings, seemed restrictive. (Expected by whom? Beyond what?) Our headteacher introduced the study during a day of professional development, and something clicked. The principle of 'the ethics of everybody' (whose opposite is *some people*, rather than *no one*) made me consider my previous role as an LSA and my reasons for training as a teacher. It also made me wonder whether these theories could be put into practice in the classroom.

I work in a school where we teach mixed-attainment groups for my subject. This way of grouping is a step in the right direction: it removes certain group cultures. But can we permanently remove the labels that are still hanging

precariously around the necks of students? The invisible signs that might scream out: 'I got under 100 in my SATS so I've failed at 11!' or 'I can only complete the easy sheet!' or 'I've never been good at English!' Can we remove these barriers completely? Is it possible in the day-to-day when our systems measure, calculate and categorise students?

I don't know the answer. However, that 'not knowing' is one of the many spurs that keep me teaching. Another is the rebel in me, still fierce about breaking the entrenched view of who can make what progress. It is about stopping this idea of try, try, try again with what's been done before. I feel the time is well overdue to do it differently.

Re-invention

I have been attending the Learning without Limits Network meetings where such questions are explored by a mixed group of academics, teachers and others involved in education: people who want an education that isn't organised and structured on the basis of judgements of ability. This space prompts interesting discussion about barriers to learning, and opens up a place to consider how the pedagogical principles on which Learning without Limits approaches are based might work in teachers' day-to-day activity. Sometimes I can feel overwhelmed when I consider education as a whole, so I have to bring it back to me; to my daily actions and practices. Informed by the principles of Learning without Limits – the principles of trust, co-agency and everybody – I've experimented with different approaches in my classroom. Nothing new and shiny, just a re-invention. A more flexible way of working. In the following paragraphs, I will share some of my experimentations.

When Year 11s returned after the summer holiday, I asked them to write a letter to me with their reflections and thoughts about the previous year. After a year crammed full with expectation, knowledge, skills and new texts, I wanted to ask them how they viewed their learning at that moment. The results propelled me into the year with renewed determination to work with them on their GCSE journey. They were honest about what they needed, where they thought they were succeeding, the areas they felt less confident. They thanked and celebrated with me. They gave me perceptive advice about where they needed to go next. They gave me an emotional hour as I read what they had written!

Another idea came out of my frustration with a series of unsuccessful lessons involving students doing research. Copy and paste was being used too frequently, and there was an over-reliance on Google searches, without any substantial contextual links being made between material found online and the text being studied. Thinking, in light of the principles of trust and co-agency, about why the activity had not worked, I realised that my given task had become dry and detached. There was little student engagement because some students couldn't see the point in making the activity individual. On reflection, it seemed that from their point of view, I was asking them all to produce a

similar piece of work, one whose purpose and level of challenge wasn't clear enough to them. Therefore, in their eyes, a quick copy and paste would suffice.

I decided to change my approach. I asked students to produce an end product of research that worked for them, in a format they found most helpful. I shared with them my expectations in terms of what they needed to be able to do with the research. I made clear that I would provide anything they requested in terms of resources for the one lesson remaining. String-bound intricate booklets, complex animations and detailed verbal presentations were shared two lessons later. It was worth taking a precious extra hour over this work, although I had to trust that the students would indeed finish the task. I made myself not step in to hurry them along – something I found difficult at the end of the first hour! A group prone to chatter, they worked productively after the initial 15 minutes' settling in to this different way of working. Many students revealed their creativity, and a previously unseen work ethic, to generate an outpouring of pride and knowledge, and finished products much more helpful and memorable than the information sheet we usually produced. Many of these end products included valuable links to the text they were studying, and I was thrilled when I read about these links in the following assessment.

Interesting conversations about learning occurred during the two lessons, such as how to use time effectively, how to make effective links between research and the text, and when to change an approach if something wasn't working. I learnt about my own practice: when to trust students to work in their own way, and how important it was to let them find that path without overbearing guidance. Two pairs didn't finish completely in the lesson time, and instead completed the task for homework, but on their own. It seemed they had each relied on their partner's work too heavily, so couldn't make effective links as they didn't understand the notes their partners had made. In the subsequent evaluation of the activity, some students told me that they had learnt about their own way of working, and not just about J.B. Priestley and the context of his play, *An Inspector Calls*.

Bridge and Pathway

I have adapted my practice in other ways. The principle of co-agency has been a particular focus. The need to build a strong relationship between teacher and learner has always been non-negotiable for me, but Learning without Limits has given me a framework in which to understand the importance of this aspect of being a teacher. It's hard to articulate how this occurs, and important to acknowledge that Learning without Limits approaches don't offer a recipe or a blueprint. But some features of my way of working now include:

- Extending choice, a manifestation of trust, by asking students to sign up to specific revision sessions rather than inviting everyone to all of them, or making each session compulsory.
- Acting out of co-agency by taking on, and responding to, student feedback that sometimes my teacher minutes didn't give them enough time to reflect,

digest and improve. Or by setting up focused individual or small group troubleshooting sessions to address areas students have identified as gaps in their knowledge.

- Trying to follow an ethic of everybody by exploring many different ways to approach an exam question, notably by working with Key Stage 4 (KS4) students to build an approach that works for them by considering ways in which their work has developed from year 7.
- Asking the students what path they wanted their week to take, and then offering options for tasks we would tackle rather than requiring just one **TO** be undertaken. These options might range from a focus on different aspects of creative writing to how much time we would spend on different elements of a text.

I still make decisions about what my students need. I'm the professional, and the bridge that carries the curriculum and subject knowledge to them. I'm well versed in their course requirements, so I can offer many different options and ideas of which they are unaware. I have my history of experience in education. But students have an important voice too. They have valuable opinions on how they make meaning. If we don't value the agency of the students, we risk undermining their commitment to their learning.

So, where am I now? With the current conversations about knowledge-rich curricula, and teachers as the ultimate expert in the room, and with an emphasis on practices such as over-learning, interleaving and rote learning, at times I feel engulfed by the ever-changing political landscape, by new expectations, new syllabuses and new initiatives, and by research that seems at odds with my beliefs. However, I try to bring it back to how I started. Listen to the individual, and help each student understand that their learning path is neither predestined nor set firm and buried deep in the middle of stone. The future is in the making in the present, and barriers, however deep dug, can start to be chipped away in the classroom.

KATIE WOODS teaches English at a Norfolk comprehensive school. *Correspondence*: katie.woods@framinghamearl.net