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## Expeditions, Projects and Trees: working hard, getting smart and being kind

MADELEINE HOLT

**ABSTRACT** This article reports on a short film being made for the Edge Foundation by the author. It records the innovative approach to learning taken by two comprehensive schools serving areas of high deprivation. Work in these schools integrates knowledge and skills, and offers a context in which all students, whatever their perceived ‘ability’, make effective and valuable contributions, find success, and so progress educationally.

I am no great fan of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, but their creator said some very stimulating things the other day – and they filled me with hope for the future of teaching within comprehensive education.

Andreas Schleicher was addressing the Education Select Committee in Westminster. He had been invited to talk about what we should be doing to prepare British children for the future. Schleicher talks with both charm and precision. He presents an essentially economic rather than cultural argument for educational change, as one would expect from an employee of the OECD. But that’s useful, because he frames his arguments with language that centrist and right-wing politicians find unthreatening.

The committee did an excellent job of interrogating him. So what were his pearls of wisdom? Essentially he said that our education system in England was obsessed (as we know) with knowledge at the expense of skills. As he succinctly put it, you can’t have one without the other. He politely questioned the point behind the highly polarised ‘K v S’ debate, as one might call it, which consumes certain folks on social media. He clearly sees it as a mighty waste of everyone’s time, when instead we should be looking with an open mind at how educators outside Britain are racing ahead with new models to provide both the knowledge and the skills our young people need.

So what kind of thing are they doing, asked the committee chair, Robert Halfon MP? Schleicher explained that most of the innovation outside England was around enquiry-based learning, or what some people would call project-based learning. He explained that this kind of learning across disciplines enabled students to develop an understanding of differing points of view – as he put it, ‘the more angles you have, the more perspectives you can take, I think that is a big advantage today’. It seems to me that the very best setting for absorbing other people’s points of view is in a mixed attainment group, and not surprisingly project-based learning often takes place in this context.

But already I hear the cry of traditionalists: ‘Oh no, not project-based learning!’ It’s one of their particular dislikes. Nick Gibb, the school standards minister, likes to remind people about a study several years ago that claimed that project-based learning didn’t help so-called less able students progress. What he doesn’t talk about is how much that particular study was compromised: it ran only for two years, and half the schools dropped out along the way.

While Schleicher calmly points out the positives of project-based learning, the independent education charity, the Edge Foundation, has produced a timely summary of international evidence on its effectiveness. It is curated by the UCL Institute of Education and Oxford University.

Edge is leading the way in encouraging schools to introduce deeper learning. The charity started out extolling the importance of technical education, but has matured into a highly effective advocate of a broad curriculum for all – with project-based and learning through expeditions as some of the key techniques for combining knowledge and skills. Its head of research, Olly Newton, talks of the importance of not just a ‘knowledge-rich’ but a ‘knowledge-engaged’ curriculum – a phrase you may have heard from the Ofsted chief inspector. It’s not a new idea, as many of *FORUM*’s long-time readers will know – and, like anything, you can do it badly. Nor does it seem very radical: it’s simply applying facts to real-life situations. It brings the learning to life for students, while developing the deeper skills young people need when they leave school. Again, Schleicher talks both about the importance of ‘applied knowledge’ and of research which suggests students actually gain more knowledge when they use it to solve problems.

I have been lucky enough to film the early stages of Edge’s work in the north of England. For the last few months I have been following Year 7 students in a comprehensive in the north-east and in a purpose-built secondary school in Doncaster. Excelsior Academy on Tyneside is in an area of entrenched deprivation, while XP has an average ability range achieved through a lottery for admissions (the school is eleven times over-subscribed).[1] In Newcastle, the students are doing three hours of cross-curricular, project-based learning a week. In Doncaster the curriculum is almost entirely based around ‘learning expeditions’, with a huge focus on working outside the classroom.

It’s evident from both these endeavours that students are learning infinitely more than just memorising and regurgitating standardised content.

But the thing that really stands out is that all children, whatever their perceived capability, can engage with this kind of learning. Why? Because the multifaceted quality of the projects gives space for all kinds of attributes and enthusiasms to bubble to the surface.

Equally, that space allows students to progress at their own, individual rates, making a nonsense of average rates of progress. Watching these initiatives evolve, labelling students by ability ceases to have any purpose. Young people are able to find new sides to themselves. Their education is less about meeting predetermined targets than about pursuing their own learning priorities in tune with what the school wants and values.

What does this look like in practice? At Excelsior one project looked at why there was a high level of homelessness in the local area and what the students could do about it. As the weeks passed, the students became co-creators with their teachers over the direction of their project. After visiting the People's Kitchen, a charity that feeds Newcastle's homeless, they decided they wanted to fundraise themselves for vulnerable people. This led to all the students becoming mini entrepreneurs, thinking up a variety of stalls where they could sell things to the other students in the school.

Meanwhile, another class looked at ways to develop sustainable sources of energy. One day they took a bus to the port of Blyth on the Northumberland coast to find out about wind power. No sooner were they off the charabanc than they were working in small groups to figure out how to make a wind turbine using a small domestic fan. Beneath the usual excitable chatter of escaping the confines of the classroom, you could witness thinking, teamwork and problem solving all around you.

Back at school, students came up with their own ways of generating renewable energy: a dance floor that turned the footfall into electricity; a baby buggy that created energy when pushed. The project culminated in a grand exhibition to fellow students, staff and families, with the creators explaining animatedly how their inventions worked. Oracy in action.

Traditionalists might scoff, but surely the kinds of skills developed in these projects will be essential in an increasingly automated economy, where we'll all have to show a whole lot more than just fact memorisation in order to be in work?

Likewise, life is lived in projects, not subjects – so isn't this an infinitely more useful way of preparing for the outside world? Just as project-based learning breaks down the false polarities of knowledge versus skills, and bright versus dim, it does away with the battle between subjects and projects. They each energise each other.

Most importantly, some of the children considered to have additional needs were the most engaged in this adventure. And their enthusiasm – and often their tangential way of seeing things – spread to those students seen as more traditionally 'academic'. Staff rigorously recorded how each child was developing a whole range of skills, alongside doing the requisite number of hours on particular aspects of the National Curriculum. From our point of view

as filmmakers, we could see from the children's faces how their confidence and their relationships with each other were growing by the week – and we could capture that on camera.

This brings me back once more to Schleicher: he told MPs that 'the success of systems that get *everybody* to do well is a big advantage in the fourth industrial revolution'. That's because automation will amplify skills differences – unless we do something about it.

Now let's shift to XP school in Doncaster for a taste of an expedition. As at Excelsior, the journey starts with a guiding question. In this case Year 7 settled on looking at the causes of deforestation. For us, a highlight was recording the time the students spent in a nearby forest. They each had to sit under a tree on their own for an hour and a half, thinking not just about the trees but how they had changed as students since starting at XP last September.

As I write this I can see before me the querulous expression of someone of a more traditional disposition, wanting to know how this in any way amounts to an education. Well, they would have to hear the responses from the students, and then they would get their answer. The pupils' connection with nature and their ability to reflect on their own character and learning was something to behold. And again, some of the most lyrical students were those with additional needs.

Their project climaxed with an awesome couple of days learning to spray paint one whole wall of the school with a graffiti tableau inspired by the film 'The Lorax'. Every child got to 'tag' their signature on the picture – a permanent reminder of what they did in Year 7 for future year groups to admire.

As at Excelsior, XP parents were invited to see what their children had been up to. The hall was packed. Given the school has its fair share of families facing multiple challenges, this was no mean achievement.

For me, the comment from the graffiti artist summed it up: 'At the previous workshops I have done with kids I have had to worry about the cans – them running off with them – but it's not happened here. I think the kids have got some kind of different respect here 'cos they all know each other and they are all looking after each other and I think they are a good community, so they are learning really well.'

So you can see where my paean to this kind of learning is leading. Here is a wonderful example of the virtues of educating side by side, because there is something for everyone in an expeditionary or project-based approach. As one of the founders of XP, Gwyn ap Harri, puts it, 'they achieve more because of their differences'.

Nor is there a lack of rigour at XP. Far from it. The school has developed its own ways of assessing how children are progressing – are they working hard, getting smart and being kind? The teachers find that if they focus on these deeper character attributes the academic progress (which they carefully calibrate to the demands of the National Curriculum and GCSEs) follows naturally.

It's no surprise that XP was declared Outstanding in all categories by Ofsted in its first inspection. The school will have its first set of GCSE results this summer. I have a feeling they will be not half bad (to indulge in a bit of Yorkshire understatement). Perhaps that's when some of the doubters will be booking a train to Doncaster. What they'll find both there and in Newcastle is not just educationally uplifting. There's a bigger dimension too. These 11 and 12 year-olds are learning about things that matter to them, that get them thinking, that challenge their assumptions, that allow them to develop a shared understanding of issues of huge relevance to their lives and beyond. Surely this is one way in which we can begin to heal our hugely divided society? Surely this is the best cue we've had in years for a wholehearted commitment to teaching without ability labelling? Or in other words, to teaching in a genuinely comprehensive setting.

### Notes

- [1] The name came about, explains the school, because 'when we were thinking of a name for our new school we thought about the many different terms associated with our vision. There were numerous words emerging that had the letters 'x' and 'p' in them. For example, high expectations, expeditions, experts, experience, etc. As a result we chose the name 'XP'!
- [2] XP school has made all its curriculum planning documents open source. You can read more at <http://www.xptrust.org/our-curriculum/>

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