Learning lost and found

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> Every evolution of thought, every prospect for thought, occurs in a reconstruction of the mind. Gaston Bachelard
>
> We were bairns. We were good at learning. David Almond

Abstract

The government's policy of helping pupils and students 'catch up' with 'lost learning' misconceives learning, and endorses pedagogical approaches based on this misconception. Whether or not to learn lies with the learner, so teaching is more properly understood as an act of faith in people rather than of delivery to them. Such a view has implications for the restoration of formal education after the pandemic.

Key words: learning; teaching; 'Covid-19 gap'; lost learning

In February 2021, the government appointed an education recovery commissioner to advise: 'on the design and implementation of potential interventions that will help students catch up learning lost due to the pandemic. The ambition … is that students will catch up with lost learning over the course of this Parliament'.[1]

The idea of 'lost learning', and the concomitant need for a policy of 'catch up', became established in public discourse at the turn of the year, when news items about research commissioned by the Department for Education, among others, revealed the existence of a 'Covid-19 gap'.[2] At the end of January, for example, T*he Guardian* drew on a study by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to report that:

> [Y]ear 2 pupils had significantly lower achievement in both reading and maths in autumn 2020 when compared to performance seen in year 2 in the autumn term of 2017. This represents a Covid-19 gap of around two months' progress for both reading and maths. It also shows that there is a large and concerning attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils: seven months for both reading and maths amongst year 2 pupils. It seems that the disadvantage gap is wider than earlier estimates, and will likely be further exacerbated by school closures in early 2021. (Adams, 2021.)

The NFER study reached its conclusions by comparing results achieved in standardised reading and maths tests undertaken in the autumn term 2020, by some 6000 year two pupils, against results obtained by a standardised sample of pupils taking similar tests in 2017. The education endowment fund paid for the research. On its website, the main finding is less precisely worded: 'Year 2 pupils were 2 months behind in *English* and

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maths in Autumn 2020 *compared to pupils in previous years*' (my emphases).[3]

The NFER report presents the terms 'learning loss', 'the Covid-19 gap' and 'disadvantage gap' in inverted commas (see Rose et al., 2021, p1). Furthermore, the report itself – though not the reporting of it – points out that it '*estimates* the impact on attainment on pupils in KS1 in England following this disruption to schooling' (op. cit., p1, my emphasis). The inherently speculative process for deducing the existence of 'learning loss', and hence of a 'Covid-19 gap', is set out step-by-step:

> To establish the Covid-19 gap we needed a counterfactual: what would children have learned had they not been subject to school closures? Although *impossible to measure for real*, for a standardised test this can be *estimated* from the standardisation sample, which in this case was obtained in 2017. As the standardisation was done on a nationally representative sample of schools and *assuming* limited change over time in terms of the ability of different cohorts, we can compare the mean standardised score in our sample to the standardisation mean (in this case 100). (*Ibid.*, p 2, my emphases.)

Impossible to measure for real. Schools were partially closed, so it was impossible to measure what children would have learned had they been fully open and all children in attendance. Cue a counterfactual requiring an estimate based on an assumption.

The Education Policy Institute report into learning loss and pupil 'progress', published in February, based its findings on scores in commercially available maths and reading tests furnished by an edu-business which was a partner in the research. As with the NFER report, it presents 'a method for estimating 'learning loss' ... based on the expected progress for pupils based on their prior attainment and historic rates of progress for similar pupils (DfE, p 7). A footnote towards the end of the report reiterates one element of what's been assumed: 'All of these estimates are based on an assumption that, in the absence of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, pupils would progress at the same rate as pupils in the past' (DfE, p36, note 14).

But across the rest of the report 'learning loss' is presented not as a function derived from estimates and assumptions, but as if it actually exists and is precisely measurable.

In the public square, talk of generalised 'learning loss' supposedly suffered to a greater or lesser degree by the entire school population has subsumed the particular focus in these reports on results from reading and maths tests taken by particular groups of young people. There has been no consideration of the limitations the reports acknowledge, and no suggestion that the whole approach is entirely misconceived. What if it is *impossible to measure for real* what children would have learned, not because schools weren't fully open but because you can't measure what people have learned? You can only record how they do in tests, and, for good or ill, that isn't the same thing.

What if the 'Covid-19 gap', 'lost learning', 'learning loss' and all the constructs

generated to report on – or generated through the very process of reporting – and now deployed, as the maintained education system resumes full operation, to bolster a policy of 'catching up', turn our attention away from what really matters?

The classroom's first order of reality

The term 'learning loss' purports to identify something actual, and the more convincingly when it arrives with numbers specifying the precise dimensions of the loss: two months; seven months. And yet, what is 'learning loss'? Many children and young people have not been in classrooms during the pandemic, and have certainly missed out on something. But who can believe that children and young people only learn during the hours they are taught in a fully-functioning school, or while they attempt their homework? That they learn nothing from friends and family, or on their own, at all other times? That before and after school, over weekends, during the holidays, their minds are blank and idle, at best rehearsing only what they've already learned, and at worst steadily leaking understanding, knowledge and skill? Do any of us think this of our school-aged selves? So far as government policy is concerned, 'learning loss' would seem to mean 'the loss of formal classroom teaching time'. Government used the phrase 'lost teaching time' in June 2020 when announcing a previous 'catch up' plan.[4] Better say 'teaching loss', then, and not learning loss.

But neither 'teaching loss' nor 'lost teaching time' have, as phrases, quite the same ring as 'lost learning'. Flatly prosaic in the way truth often sounds, they declare – perhaps too boldly – the teacher-centric delivery-model of education insisted upon by ministers and vaunted by Ofsted. They call to mind classroom rituals everyone who has been to school remembers, but, by spotlighting the teacher, leave pupils and students in the shadows. Is 'lost learning' the current term of choice because it lines up government alongside those who learn rather than those who teach: pupils and students denied a good they have a right to? Might it help that, in contrast to 'lost teaching time', there's a breath of tender lamentation in the phrase 'lost learning', as with its cousins, lost innocence, lost love and lost illusions?

All the same, in the government's mouth the phrase reifies what it supposedly values, and thus betrays it.

'We teach and teach', writes James Britton in a research report from an earlier age, 'and they learn and learn: if they didn't, we wouldn't'. (Barnes et al., 1971, p81). But, to the enduring chagrin of those who think teaching a glorified telling, the relationship between what's taught and what's learned is neither constant nor reliably aligned. 'The first order of reality in the classroom is the student's point-of-view', says Vivian Paley (1986, p127). And this must be so, because learning takes place where the learner is, not where the teacher is. In other words, there's always the chance of 'learning loss' –

understood as being when pupils and students don't learn what it's intended they learn – even when there's no loss of teaching time. Learning requires from pupil or student a giving of the self, or an allowing of engagement by the self. Douglas Barnes calls it 'an act of sympathy' (1976, p87). Neither physical presence nor an attentive look on a face guarantees that engagement in the activity of the class which, it might be supposed, enables the possibility of learning what's intended, or at least the likelihood of assent to that possibility. There are ways and ways for pupils to be absent. No punctilious pre-specifying of what is to be learned, and no didactic performance by a teacher, however brilliant, can outflank the reality that teaching is not an act of delivery but an act of faith, and that it is by extending trust to everyone in the class that an opportunity for everyone to learn is opened up.

Screened-off

Nor should the teacher be wary of extending such trust. It is inherent in human meeting, and teaching is a particularly intense kind of human meeting. Hasn't 'remote teaching' brought the truth of this home to us time and again, confronting us after each online lesson with what has truly been lost, educationally-speaking, to the pandemic: trust reaffirmed through the intellectual connections made, the insights won, the concentration and energy which gather moment-by-moment when working together with others physically present and close? The changing texture of the vibe in the room. Establishing, sustaining and nurturing this texture, which is to say the dynamic relationship conducive to learning, is the practice of pedagogy. But how threadbare the information a teacher can derive through a screen about where people seem to be in their learning at any moment, and about the possibilities in that moment for moving learning on! How unlikely the teacher is, under such circumstances, to be able to generate that productive tension which develops across a class through concentrated sustained work together, as a collective of engaged individuals. How next-to-impossible to open up the space in which learning happens when there's no one else in the room, only the disembodied voice and image, the illusion of proximity and reciprocity rather than its reality, to which, in normal times, the teacher is highly attuned. Such attunement is the lifeblood of that endeavour always jointly undertaken which teaching-and-learning enacts. By radically attenuating the relationship it's possible to sustain with pupils and students during the lesson, and from lesson to lesson, remote 'teaching-and-learning' all but nullifies any such sharing of responsibility for the direction, pace and nature of a lesson or a lesson-series, and hence for the learning that is possible.

In the loss of all this, at the close of another bout of remote 'teaching', a feeling congeals that our obligations as teachers have gone undischarged. A residue of incompleteness.

While teaching, attention is directed at others and at oneself simultaneously. Teaching involves standing inside and outside the moment, responding to the moment while also assessing one's response, listening to the moment even while making it happen or finding it happening, gauging the effect, the unfolding, thinking about where to go next. All this is much harder to do online in an organic and responsive way, rather than in a mechanical and reactive one. The pedagogical stance imposed by the space and format of remote teaching-and-learning is very one-sided. It induces didacticism, which leans towards the rhetorical, as against receptive listening on the teacher's part. It screens off scope to be open to the collective dynamic, and to the individual nuances of engagement that fuel it.

For 'learning loss' to make sense as an educational concept, learning would have to be fundamentally misconceived as its opposite: an inert thing instead of a process of change in the self. Learning would have to be seen as something other than the consequence of a relational dynamic involving the person learning, the people they learn among and with, the person teaching, and the content of what's taught, all met together and subject to that meeting's own rhythms and development in time. That the nonsense of 'learning loss' can attain widespread acceptance, as it seems to have done, suggests that we have indeed lost some kind of learning, or unlearned it.

Current government policy considers teaching and learning to be mostly a process of inputs and outputs, of delivery and reception, and sometimes of caring diagnosis and the administration of a ready-mixed remedy. The learning we have lost, a wisdom long distilled, seems to me to spring from seeing teaching and learning entirely otherwise than in these ways. To find and then reclaim what's been lost for practice, it will help to remember that our over-riding responsibility as teachers is not to any policy, but to our pupils' and students' learning.

Re-set not re-start

In 2004 the *Hundred Languages of Children Exhibition* came to the UK. It celebrated a view of children as innately competent, educable and curious, and as inevitably meaning-making in the face of their encounter with the world. Loris Malaguzzi helped devise the exhibition in order to affirm a truth about young children which it never hurts to be reminded of: their capacity, among other things, for committed intellectual inquiry; for research.[5] The exhibition revealed the child – any child – who arrives in the classroom to be someone not blighted by deficits but possessed of many ways to think and to express this thinking (the *hundred languages*), and a veteran of many experiences which can be seen in the particular sense urged by John Dewey as educationally important. Integral, composed, possessing their own unity, such experiences are understood as having both an active and a passive side, as consisting of something done and something

undergone as a consequence, not in alternation but in relationship. Dewey writes: 'This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence. The scope and content of the relations measure the significant content of an experience'. (Boydston, 1987, p51)

To conceive of the child this way, as already able to grasp – to whatever degree – the scope and content of the relation at the heart of an experience, is to acknowledge the child as always already learning. This articulation finds its echo in the teacher's extension of trust to the child, and it justifies the teacher's act of faith in teaching. It reveals how unfounded is the anxiety which the government's notion of 'lost learning' subtly plays on, namely whether or not children *are* learning. Instead, it poses the necessary question: what is it children are to learn? That question raises many others, notably about the nature of the curriculum and who should decide it, and about the matter of assessment, one small subset of which is testing. It's a question which returns attention to the conditions and resources for learning, and how these may be enriched and improved.

In other words, to conceive of the child – any child, any age – as having *a hundred languages* pulls up short those seeking to reimpose, post-pandemic, the status quo ante. It inspires a re-set, not a re-start. Instead of writing off the months when schools weren't fully open as a period in which children and young people 'lost' the opportunity to learn what school would teach them, it invites us to acknowledge what will have been learned, in ways not formally and externally directed and sustained but internally energised and supported by circumstance and what was to hand. The loss of opportunities for learning resourced by all that school can offer is regrettable. Nonetheless, thrown back on their own devices, children and young people continued to learn. Taken seriously, that learning – whatever its scope and variety – has significant implications for formal education.

The devotees of 'lost learning' evade these. Restorationists, they insist that all we require is a return to the way we were, only more so. Longer school days. Additional lessons. Cramming sessions. The school year repeated. Convinced that the sole authoritative guarantee of the extent of someone's learning is the test-score, they want results put back on track. So teaching and learning must again be held hostage by the test, and teachers, pupils and students dance to its demand. To teach the test must be restored as a teacher's prime professional duty, however unethical that duty is and damaging to those who teach and learn.

As for learning, it must continue to mean in greatest part remembering: the retention rather than the reconstruction of knowledge and understanding. There's no place in the lexicon of lost learning for the idea of learning as critique or creation, nor for considering pupils and students to be, as the late teacher and scholar Michael Armstrong powerfully argued, cultural agents as well as cultural inheritors.

If we are serious about improving education after the Covid-19 pandemic, we should not talk about 'learning loss' in the sense intended by government. To speak of learning as if it were entity rather than dynamic, an inert and tally-able thing delivered or let slip, is to parrot a discourse whose mis-educative language need to rebuked and rebutted. The learning we have lost – or of which we find ourselves by some means dispossessed – remains ready to be found. In books and journals, of course, and wherever teachers reflect on their principles, purposes and practices as they consider again the complex realities of teaching and learning: the truth of the classroom.

Notes

1. Education Recovery Commissioner: role specification and terms of reference (publishing.service.gov.uk)

2. This research included reports from several bodies, including:

National Foundation for Educational Research:

Impact_of_school_closures_KS1_interim_findings_paper_-_Jan_2021.pdf (educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk)

Education Policy Institute, and Renaissance Learning, later published on the Department for Education website:

Learning loss research: Understanding progress in the 2020 to 2021 academic year - Education Policy Institute (epi.org.uk)

Institute for Fiscal Studies: The crisis in lost learning calls for a massive national policy response - Institute For Fiscal Studies - IFS

3. Best evidence on impact of Covid-19 on pupil attainment | Education Endowment Foundation | EEF

4. Billion pound Covid catch-up plan to tackle impact of lost teaching time - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

5. The Hundred Languages of Children | Reggio Children

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