CHAPTER 1

Learning in Classrooms – What's the Best We Know?

> *In this chapter*
> Learning from the best of our experience
> Looking ahead

Learning from the Best of our Experience

To begin this book and this chapter we invite you to initiate an 'appreciative inquiry' (Hammond, 2000) in order to introduce the themes of this book. Appreciative inquiry is an approach to innovation or improvement that starts by identifying the best of what currently is. It takes the stance that in every organisation something works well, and that we would be well advised to learn from it and take it into our future. Participants are asked to identify how 'the best of what currently is' came about, and work at imagining what it would be like if there were more. Then if we work out how these best experiences came about, we can identify what will be needed for more to happen.

We have used this approach to think about promoting more effective learning in classrooms. In every classroom something works well. It is important to identify these aspects:
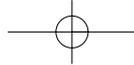
To notice when 'best' learning happens in classrooms.
To pick up a range of creative perspectives including those of young people in classrooms.
To remind ourselves of our own achievements in contributing to effective learning in classrooms.
To appreciate young people's roles and potentials.
To carry forward into the future the best parts of our past.

> Take a few minutes to think about a classroom you know in which the sense of learning has been really positive. Maybe there has been engagement, excitement, reflection, an 'ah-ha' moment …
>
> When you have identified the situation do all you can to reconstruct it in your mind's eye – recall the room, the conditions, the people and so on. Capture the concrete details of the things that made that experience possible. If possible, share this with someone else.

You might find yourself identifying such things as:

- Learners drove the agenda.
- There was real help going on between the pupils.
- They were active.
- People were taking thoughtful risks and weren't afraid of making mistakes.
- I stood back and the students ran with it.

Appreciative inquiry is not the usual way of approaching improvement. It contrasts with problem solving and action planning when the question asked is 'What is the problem here and what are we going to do about it?' It is a positive approach that does not seek to find fault or emphasise negative aspects. It encourages people to build on existing success, building on the idea that people have usually lived some part of their dream.

A further part of the activity involves participants in drawing up 'provocative propositions': these are statements which build on their best experience of effective learning and provoke thinking to go forward. These statements help them to imagine what it would be like if the future of learning in classrooms was more effective, and what they might have to contribute.

Here are some examples from our experience.

> Children learn best …
>
> when they take responsibility for their own learning;
>
> when they are actively engaged in their learning;
>
> when learning is interactive (as opposed to passive or seat-work);
>
> when they see themselves as successful learners.

These statements were produced by the staff of a primary school. If we look in more depth at the statements we can see that the teachers believed that the best learning in schools occurs in classrooms where it is active, social, involves learner responsibility and the young people have awareness of themselves as learners. The statements may not seem very provocative (in the sense of being challenging
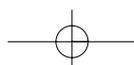
or surprising); indeed some people have commented that they are self-evident (we wish they were!). Perhaps this is because they are the outcome of group deliberations rather than unique individual experiences. However, these teachers were identifying things they needed to work at to improve learning in classrooms in their school. In fact they used them to shape a project on learning.

Other examples we have collected from teachers include:

Effective learning …
> occurs when the teacher is invisible;
> happens when people are willing to be vulnerable;
> occurs when students take an active role in their learning experiences;
> happens after failure;
> does not need a teacher to give students knowledge;
> happens when the teacher throws out her plans;
> is when classroom management brings about a positive atmosphere where students want to learn.

You might find yourself provoked by some of these statements, and it is worth reflecting on your own reaction, alongside another reflection on what might have prompted the teachers to make these statements. For example, we found ourselves commenting that the final statement is more about teachers' activities than learning, and suggests that young people only want to learn when it is managed by their teachers. The statement suggests something about the conditions and context in which the teacher making that proposition was working. Our reactions tell you something about our views of learning.
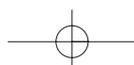
We also noticed that a number of these statements suggested a less didactic role for teachers than is common. And a couple look at vulnerability and failure, and point to the importance of feelings in learning.
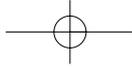
What provocative propositions would you make as a result of your engagement in the activity above?

What would be the most provocative propositions you could make about learning in classrooms known to you and your colleagues?

What does your proposition say about your view of learning and the conditions in which you are promoting learning?

Further dialogue between teachers is likely to promote more widespread understanding about learning in classrooms.

> Who would you like to engage in dialogue?

Another element in this book will be to encourage you to undertake enquiries with learners about issues which affect their learning. And we regularly receive evidence that the view from pupils affirms the thoughts that teachers have. For example, a school in West London surveyed all the pupils about a range of things to do with school and learning. From the very many things that were said, here is a brief selection. Perhaps some of the themes connect to what is emerging for you.

Year Group	*What do you like about how you learn at school?*	*What would you like to see included?*
Reception	Choosing	Choosing (2)
Year 1	Reading books to find out Investigation Hands on	Golden Time
Year 2	Reading to find out Choices	More time for reading More time to finish Choosing activities
Year 3	Project work	Free time
Year 4	Experiments	
Year 5	Independent ICT learning	
Year 6	Sit where we want Not stopping at the end of 45 minutes	More free choice

What do you think of these comments from some pupils? Does their perspective overlap with yours?

Looking Ahead

The kinds of issues that we hope are raised for you by the appreciative inquiry are the kinds of issues we deal with in-depth in this book. We now outline the themes that we have found that excite, interest and intrigue teachers. These have emerged through involvement with teachers and young people as we have engaged with them through Masters and Diplomas courses, in projects with schools focused on learning, in research with young people and teachers and in
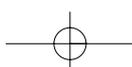
writing for various audiences over the years. These themes have emerged through our writing and conversations and deep reflection together about learning.

Views of effective learning in classrooms

It is a key point of this book that various different views of what will count for effective learning in classrooms exist around us, and that these importantly different views are rarely analysed. You might have noticed something about your own view as a result of devising a provocative proposition from the appreciative activity above. Here is one view of learning that you might want to compare with your own:

> How do people learn except through pressure and threat? (Chris Woodhead, formerly the Chief Inspector of Schools in England, writing in The Spectator in 1995.)

Different conceptions of learning are outlined in the next chapter. We begin to describe our case for learning that involves activity, collaboration, learner agency and meta-learning (learning about learning). Our stance contrasts with views such as that of the former Chief Inspector above.

When we look at classrooms what do we see?

We trace conceptions of learning in classrooms, including through drawings and photographs by children, and notice the dominance of a particular view of learning. We notice that this view of learning – a teacher-centred, passive model – is not necessarily effective today.

What other discourses influence teachers?

We consider external and internal influences on learning in classrooms, and how the effects of a focus on performance in tests, ideas about the curriculum and assessment, about fixed ability, trends and fads, all conspire to reinforce conditions that can work against effective learning.

When people work against the grain

In our work we are fortunate to learn with teachers who find the resources to work against the dominant influences and who promote effective learning in their classrooms. In Chapter five we present three examples to identify the factors that supported teachers in promoting more effective learning. For example, it seems important in schools to make learning and learning about learning part of the public discourse.
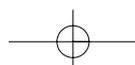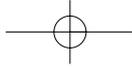
Promoting activity, collaboration, agency and meta-learning in the classroom

The following chapters examine in more depth the strategies used by teachers working against the grain. They promote increased active learning, collaboration, agency (young people driving the agenda and process of their learning) and meta-learning (helping young people understand their own learning).

Reclaiming assessment

We include ideas about the way in which assessment can promote effective learning and we use the four themes of the previous chapters to illustrate the relationship between effective learning and classroom assessment practices.

Being exceptional

The book ends by honouring the experiences and voices of teachers and students and by noticing what enabled them to be exceptional. We invite you to express your vision for your classroom and to take part in reclaiming and celebrating your professional voice in classrooms and staffrooms.