Scaffolding conversations about learning: a work in progress

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Abstract

Scott Martin graduated from the Herts. MEd in Teaching and Learning in 2005. This article provides an account of his attempt to use 'learning preference profiling' to develop student understanding of the learning process. It charts the changing focus of his project and the way in which he and his MEd supervisor, Amanda Roberts, collaborated to support students in becoming proactive in the dialogue about their own learning.

Unlike the other contributions to this journal, this article is jointly authored. One author is the teacher whose project is the focus of the article and the other is his MEd supervisor who acted as collaborator and source of support. Scott Martin is an Assistant Headteacher who undertook a project as part of his work supporting his colleagues in developing teaching and learning in the school (Martin, 2005). The insider-outsider collaboration that developed in the course of this project was to become a key learning point.

Adeyfield was designated a 'school facing challenging circumstances' by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2001. This category is for schools whose General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results are less than 25% 5 A*-C grades. Being placed in this category entitled the school to additional funding for three years through a Leadership Incentive Grant. The Headteacher decided to use this to fund strategies to enable the school to raise standards through the development of teaching and learning which had been highlighted as a key concern.

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The school had introduced The Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP), championed by Smith (1998), as one way of developing teaching and learning. Within this, a focus on learning preferences had been developed. Scott's initial strategy was to use a conversation about learning preferences to develop students' understanding of their own learning which he hoped would raise levels of student motivation as had occurred elsewhere (Murray-Harvey, 1994; Dunn *et al.*, 1989a; Johnson, 2006; Peacock, 2001). He also thought that considering student views in this way would help him to review his own practice and at the same time generate tools to help colleagues engage students in their own conversations about learning.

A project to foster pedagogic dialogue

The project was launched at a whole staff meeting with interested staff being invited to attend a follow-up meeting. Of the 18 teachers who attended, 11 decided to take part in the project. Teachers generally decided to work with two of their own teaching groups. The students within these groups were given a Learning Preferences Profiling instrument to enable them to gain a deeper understanding of the way in which individuals learn. This instrument is based on Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and had been used in a number of Hertfordshire secondary schools (Johnson, 2006). It resembles a 'questionnaire' in format and appearance but it generates data which is more useful for teaching rather than research purposes. Scott and his colleagues used the students' responses to the instrument to draw up a list detailing each individual's most and least preferred learning style. The teachers taking part in the project then shared this with the students and discussed with them their preferred learning styles and strategies.

The teachers taking part in the project had been asked to review their schemes of work for their chosen groups to ensure that they included activities which would appeal to students across the learning preference range. Teachers would then review their lessons with students, using learning preferences as a starting point to initiate a dialogue about learning, a strategy that had proved to be effective in other projects (Roberts, 2001; Younger and Warrington, 2003; Johnson, 2006). Scott asked teachers to record interesting features of their conversations with students either by writing brief descriptions on post-it notes, keeping a more detailed journal and using a dictaphone to record comments. There was some take up of the first option but no one chose to use a dictaphone. Teachers were asked to

encourage students to talk about their experience of the lesson by providing them with a series of prompt sheets which asked students to respond to a statement starter such as "In this lesson I enjoyed ….". Students were grouped, sometimes with students with the same preferred learning style and sometimes with students who had quite different contributions to make. Students were asked to record interesting points which people in their group made about learning on record sheets designed for the purpose.

Although the project had similar characteristics to other projects that had been successful (Johnson, 2006) Scott's project failed, at least in the way it had originally been planned. Teachers were finding it difficult to record their learning conversations with students. Time may have been a factor but also perhaps a lack of understanding of what constituted a learning conversation. Students equally were happy to talk to one another but found it hard to record their own or one another's views. It was becoming clear that support for the project was falling away and when Scott talked to his colleagues he found that only one teacher was prepared to continue with the project. He needed to re-think his strategy.

Scott revisited his original question: How can we encourage students to talk about their learning in a way which supports that learning? He went back to his reading to try to find a way forward. Fielding (2004) argued that it is important that students involved in a project focusing on dialogue feel part of the process, rather than having something imposed on them. In talking to the students, Scott learnt that they did not feel they were gaining a great deal from the learning conversations. They students were interested in talking about learning but they wanted more freedom to air their views.

Back to the drawing board

The students did not want this conversation to be restricted to 'learning preferences' but they were keen to share more general views about how they felt their learning could be supported in school. This seemed to be a fruitful way forward but Scott thought that it might be more effective if the discussion were to be led by someone new, someone who was not perceived to be part of the school hierarchy. This would make clear that this conversation was different from those which had gone before, that the agenda was theirs. He explored this with his MEd supervisor, Amanda Roberts. Amanda was also accustomed to this sort of activity in her role as a leadership consultant so she offered to facilitate a workshop, working

with the students to enable them to share some of their beliefs about learning in a more open forum. It was decided that Amanda would lead a workshop called 'Thinking about Learning'. Rather than focusing solely on learning preferences, the 90 minute workshop allowed students to discuss wider opinions about school and learning. The 24 Year 10 students who had participated in the project were informed of the proposed workshop and were given the opportunity to withdraw. All agreed to participate. Scott's role was to act as a data-gatherer, to record students' views both in note form at the time and by videoing the workshop for future analysis.

The workshop aimed to generate dialogue with students about learning but with the focus on listening to students and allowing them to shape the agenda. Stimulus material was provided: for example, a card sort activity was used to provoke student debate on the value of school and of their own self-image as learners. Students responded very positively to the activities and to the opportunities for free dialogue. Their comments showed that they felt strongly that their learning was affected either positively or negatively by a number of factors. From the initial analysis of the data Scott was able to group the factors under five headings: the teacher, the activity, friends, motivation and the environment.

For these students, teacher behaviour impacted directly on student behaviour and, ultimately, self-esteem. 'Showing respect' became a key phrase.

> *The one's that I really work for are the one's like Miss A coz she shows us respect.*
>
> (Student C)

> *They [teachers] expect us to be polite and stuff to them but they think they can talk to us how they like.*
>
> (Student F)

Variety of activity was similarly seen as a key lever to learning, with students wishing to have their individual learning needs met.

> *Work should be adapted because this might be better for all pupils. Most teachers seem to have one thing for everyone to do, this is not always easy for everyone.*
>
> (Student H)

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By extension, students also appeared to understand the part played by motivation in their learning, with this being linked to activity for many.

> *I don't like it when lessons are boring with long speeches from the teacher.*
>
> (Student G)

The impact of peer relationships on learning was seen to be very strong, either positively or negatively.

> *It's difficult (to learn) when I'm being distracted by a group of friends.*
>
> (Student G)

> *My friends help me because they support what I do.*
>
> (Student H)

A discussion about the learning environment demonstrated that the impact of this on student learning was strong. When student A mentioned that he preferred to learn at home, a chorus of agreement came from the rest of the students. The majority talked about the 'freedom' they had at home to choose what their space looked like.

Wanting to know more

The data from this workshop provided new insight into the students' opinions yet Scott felt that it generated only a superficial perspective. He decided to use semi-structured interviews to enable him to get beneath the surface of students' views (Denscombe, 2003), selecting 6 students for this purpose. The choice of method was particularly important because Scott wanted to respond to the students' desire to control the agenda. Semi-structured interviews would enable a flexible approach, driven by the interviewee's responses (Robson, 2002). The questions focused on the five themes which arose from the workshop: the teacher, the activity, friends, motivation and the environment. Broad questions were formulated to allow students to elaborate on the effect of these aspects of the school experience on their learning.

Choice of activity was seen as an important factor in effective learning, although they recognised the need to balance freedom of choice with the learning objectives of the lesson. Many of the students demonstrated a narrow view of the purpose of learning

however, linking it overtly to the passing of exams. Interestingly, they attributed their success in learning to the teacher rather than to their own motivation. Students reiterated their view of a 'good' teacher as one who gave them respect, spoke in a calm and reasonable way and developed a good working relationship with the class. Environment was again stressed as a key factor, as was the influence of friends.

What did we achieve? What did we learn?

This project began as an attempt to stimulate dialogue to increase students' awareness of how they prefer to learn on the assumption that this would enable them to improve their learning strategies. The project had the potential to contribute to improved teaching and learning across the school but it faltered and the plan had to be abandoned. However, it is important to highlight the fact that, ultimately, the project was extremely productive. It was productive in two ways: first, it acted as a catalyst for further developments, and second, it led to a number of important insights into the process of development itself.

Being a 'school facing challenging circumstances' necessitates finding a way to start a process that can lead to the raising of achievement, and student consultation of the sort that emerged from this project seems to be a key aspect of the drive for improvement. The key is the students. Throughout this project they demonstrated a level of maturity that would surprise some of their teachers and the ability and willingness to offer suggestions to improve their school. This view is well supported in the literature on student consultation Rudduck *et al*., 1996; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; MacBeath *et al*., 2003). A number of really positive proposals came out of this project: for example, the inclusion of students in the school's Teaching and Learning group. Despite the difficulties encountered in the course of this project, it has illuminated the need to re-construct students as partners in the enterprise of school improvement. Students are keen to take on this active role and relish 'opportunities for dialogic encounter' (Fielding, 2004).

Insights into the process of development
A number of key insights can be gained from this story. The power of a collaborative approach to development work is clear, despite the difficulties encountered by Scott in working with colleagues as originally planned. In this case, collaboration with Amanda supported Scott in reframing his problem and in deciding on a way

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forward. There are many other sources of investigative partners – students, parents, local authority advisors – who could be brought in to work productively alongside teachers.

The fact that Amanda is external to the school may itself be significant. The perceived authority of the teacher can be an obstacle when inviting students to take the lead in pedagogic exchange. In this case, Amanda was unknown to the students and therefore able to interact with them without the potentially intrusive influence of custom and hierarchy. The use of a 'visitor' as a collaborator can have the added advantage of allowing the context of the development work, in this case the school, to itself be seen in a new light.

Clearly this project was not one which went according to plan. However, Scott's positive attitude to the direction which the students themselves gave to the project allowed him to gain some valuable insights. In this case, the original objective of using learning preference profiling as a vehicle to encourage dialogue was re-framed by Scott as a 'starter exercise'. From his initial attempts to encourage student dialogue he learnt what was really important to the students to discuss.

This demonstrates well the warning that Michael Fullan gave us when he put forward key lessons about managing change: he said that 'Change is a journey not a blueprint' and 'Planning comes later' (Fullan, 1993). With these slogans Fullan was trying to point out that we need to accept that the path of change is hard to predict and that we have to be prepared to re-think. We may launch a planned process of development but it is probable that we will only be in a position to plan effectively once we have made a beginning and discovered what we are really dealing with.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the project, the main challenge that faced the school is how to engage members of the teaching staff in this pedagogic dialogue. Scott's story reveals the difficulties of getting teachers involved in such a dialogue. Students found the initial approach limiting and it is perhaps the case that the teacher collaborators had a similar experience. While student consultation is a vital component of school improvement, pedagogic dialogue has to involve all stakeholders, especially the teaching staff. As leaders of development work, therefore, we have the responsibility to ensure that the experience is a positive and educative one for all involved.

The real challenge then is to find ways to involve both students and teachers in an open dialogue about learning and the conditions that enable it to occur.

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