

# Learners in the driving seat

Who is responsible for students' learning? **Chris Watkins'** ground-breaking series looks at how young people themselves can take the lead – and the excellent results that can follow



**T**ry this activity with a class you know. Ask them all to point an index finger at the ceiling. Tell them that you are going to ask them a question, and when they have come up with their answer to the question they should then point their finger at the answer. The question is: “Who is responsible for your learning?”

In many cases all fingers will point at the teacher. Sometimes pupils start to notice this and their fingers begin to waver. On one occasion I heard a class of 11-year-olds start to voice additional answers: “parents”, “the governors”, “the Government”! Whatever the immediate result, the ensuing conversation can lead to a few more learners quizzically pointing their fingers at themselves.

And who can blame them for being slow? After all, it’s the school’s performance that matters for league tables and it’s the teacher’s performance that all this management is about – so what do we suppose the learner actually does?

The picture in our classrooms is illuminated by recent evidence from interventions such as Assessment for Learning (AFL) and its later variants. When handled by the people who know its research base and understand the rationale, a focus on learners’ autonomy is a central theme.<sup>1</sup> Yet this same team of researchers finds that only one fifth of lessons in their project is characterised by such a spirit of AFL.<sup>2</sup> It would be wrong to suggest that the reasons for low pupil autonomy are that teachers do not value it. Further

evidence shows that promoting learners' autonomy is where the gap is biggest between current classroom practice and teachers' values.<sup>3</sup> So we can gain optimism from knowing that teachers would wish the situation to be better, but doubtless feel significant tensions in the current climate.

So what do we want for learners in our classes (as well as for ourselves as learners)? Here's where the metaphor of 'driving' our learning can offer some valuable description. When driving we have an idea for a destination – perhaps a bit of a map of the territory; we have hands on the wheel, steering – making decisions as the journey unfolds; and all this is crucially related to the core process of noticing how it's going and how that relates to where we want to be. When it comes to learning, those core processes are the key to being an effective learner. They involve planning, monitoring, and reflecting.

Plenty of research demonstrates that when learners drive the learning it leads to:

- greater engagement and intrinsic motivation<sup>4</sup>
- students setting higher challenge<sup>5</sup>
- students evaluating their work<sup>6</sup>
- better problem-solving.<sup>7</sup>

If we continue the metaphor of learning as a journey then we can also reclaim something of value from the current overemphasis on end points and underemphasis on the journey to those ends. So how can we add some detail to this metaphor? Try reading the following sequence and see whether it describes some of your experience of a driving journey.

Before starting:

- Where do we want to get to?
- Which way should we go?
- Has someone got a map?
- Or shall we make up our own route?
- Is there anything to remember from previous journeys?
- Do we need to take any equipment?

On the road:

- How's it going?
- Are we on the right track?
- Do we need to change direction?
- Shall we check back on the map?
- Has anyone gone another way?
- Cor, look!

Journey's end:

- Where did we get to?
- Is this the place we planned? Maybe it's better!
- Shall we take a photo/send a postcard?
- Did anyone get here by another route?
- Where next?

Now read the sequence again and see whether it can describe some of your experience of learning. If it does, you might agree that we can help any learner become more

effective at the core skills of planning, monitoring and reflecting by using metaphors and prompts such as these. To do so is to help them notice more about the experience of learning and become more in charge of it. In any climate, it's the learners who are responsible for whatever achievements occur, so let's give them credit for it and improve from there.

### **No magic bullets**

Classroom practices for promoting learner-driven learning (and there are no simple 'magic bullets') cluster around the themes of 'purpose and planning', 'choice', and 'voice and review'. If learners are to find purpose in classroom activities, we may need to revise some current practices which have squarely placed purpose in the voice of the teacher (as a ventriloquist for the QCA schemes of work). For example, Sonia is in a school where she is asked to put the 'learning objective' on the whiteboard. Fortunately she does not spend time getting learners to write it down, but instead asks them in pairs to discuss:

- What could it mean?
- Who uses that?
- What might I be able to do with it?
- How could we best learn that?

The discussions highlight important issues about understanding, and make key connections with pupils' real lives. And even a creative teacher like Sonia finds new ideas in the suggestions pupils make for how best to learn.

Learners also feel engagement with purpose when they feel they have made a choice. This point is sometimes responded to as though I was proposing the classroom suddenly becomes all 'free choice'. Not so. Indeed, children themselves do not seek this. Even young children express views along the lines of 'I want to make my own choices... sometimes.' Children can gain value from what adults choose as important. So even when pupils' choice is extended, it will be alongside another important aspect of learning – how they get themselves to do things they have not chosen.

Pupils might make classroom choices on what they learn, how they learn, how well they learn, and why they learn. Classroom approaches of the style of Philosophy for Children and 'intelligent learning' are salient here. When learners' questions are elicited in order to drive the agenda, teachers are often surprised. Sarah, a Reception class teacher, tried this at the start of a unit on forces, only to hear many high-level questions, including "How does a helicopter stay up?" In the same school Christie, a Year 6 teacher who is very practised in supporting learners' autonomy, was astounded at the questions that were generated after reading a short story: "What is real?", "How do we imagine?" and more.

For learners to 'drive' classroom activity we may have to review other current practices, especially those carrying the message that the teacher is driving the agenda (again sometimes as a ventriloquist for the latest package or the future test). Literacy is a domain where this is prevalent, and



children continue to have to create text for the teacher, rather than write with their own purpose. A teacher, Maria, wrote to me recently about a colleague's experience with their Year 6 class as part of a school review of the curriculum: "They asked the children what they liked and what they would like to see more of (or less of). The children said that they would often just like to have a go at writing – they felt that the teachers modelled too much sometimes and it could take the fun out of writing. They felt that if they were given a chance to 'have a go' first, then any marking or feedback would make much more sense because they'd already know what they could do and what they needed to improve."

Maria herself is someone who also engages learners' voices in significant ways. Recently she was bored with starting the year on 'classroom codes' because they turn out to be focused on compliance. So she asked her class to decide some principles for how their classroom should be in order for their learning to be best. The class came up with four principles – listening to each other, active learning, sharing thoughts and ideas, and thinking of others – and created a large poster with the acronym 'We're LAST!' (a fun provocation for their teacher in a year which could be dominated by SATs!).

It's so much easier to review a journey when one has been aware of and in touch with it all along, and that is made easier if one has planned a direction at the start. So end-of-journey reviews are likely to be much more vibrant and rich than lots of the stilted conversations in current 'plenaries'. They may be prompted by asking: "How did the driving go?"

### Promoting learner-driven learning

So how can we promote the development of more learner-

driven learning? Here we may have to face the challenging insight from those who have studied the culture of schools and its impact on classroom pedagogy. As Seymour Sarason put it, teachers treat their pupils in the same way that they as teachers are treated by their managers. So has management in your school adopted the 'command and control' style favoured by government nowadays? Or does the management in your school recognise the facts of the school situation – that it's the classroom that makes the difference – and operate in a more distributed way to help the classroom be the best it can be?

Encouraging learner-driven learning needs several actions; one is *naming the problem*. We need to foster a widespread awareness that some of the current climate may be having counter-productive effects in the classroom, as put by Maryellen Weimer:

- The more structured we make the environment, the more structure the students need.
- The more we decide for students, the more they expect us to decide.
- The more motivation we provide, the less they find within themselves.
- The more responsibility for learning we try to assume, the less they accept on their own.
- The more control we exert, the more restive their response.<sup>8</sup>

A second element of promoting learner-driven learning is *identifying the way ahead*. Here again, recent research points a direction. Out of many aspects of school conditions and their management that promote learner autonomy in the classroom, only one element has been shown to be

influential: inquiry.<sup>9</sup> So here again there is a parallel between teachers' experience in school and learners' experience in the classroom. To turn this parallel into a proactive one for both parties, teachers need to inquire and thereby be treated as professional learners themselves.

Thirdly we must *recognise the tensions for teachers*. Without a supportive forum for experimentation to help them onwards, teachers are likely to fall back on archetypal judgements of their role. These old models have been repeated in modern times by the centralised strategies in which most of the practices are based on the idea that adults know best. This in turn reflects our society's deep underestimation of young people. So we will need to help colleagues talk about the tensions that arise when they start to operate in another way, promoting more autonomy for learners, and learn to judge themselves by another set of criteria. Did they help their learners learn how to drive?

Next there is *reviewing our planning*. Much of the current pattern of classroom life relates to the ways in which teachers are being pressured to plan. An experienced teacher said to me yesterday: "Effective learning happens in classrooms when freedom is planned for." This brilliant insight reminds us that it's not a matter of giving up planning, but more a process in which teachers avoid over-engineering through gradually released control of processes and objectives. It's about planning for what learners do rather than for what teachers do.

Finally it is necessary to *recognise the reservations*. There are likely to be several 'ah, buts' which may need to be addressed:

- "They haven't got the skills." Rather than talk about students in terms of deficits, can we think about their experience to date and whether we have helped them master it yet?

- "They're not mature enough yet!" So will we stand by and wait? Or will we offer the experiences that help them mature?
- "It's unrealistic to give kids absolute freedom!" That seems like an extreme suggestion – is there anything between the extremes?
- "We've got to get on with covering the curriculum." So what shall we do with the finding that learners who plan and reflect the most get 30 per cent better scores in public examination tasks?<sup>10</sup>

In classroom life, learners can come to feel like either an origin or a pawn. An origin is someone who perceives their behaviour as determined by their own choosing, whereas a pawn is someone who perceives their behaviour as determined by external forces beyond their control. Students who have felt themselves to be pawns can be helped to become origins: they then catch up with the achievement norms of their age group, and succeed more in what school has to offer.

And just in case anyone was beginning to think that the theme of this article is a new-fangled way of handling classrooms, let's close with a reflection from nearly 400 years ago, which highlights a lot about classrooms today, and which could serve as a good motto for our management:

*"Let the beginning and the end of our didactics be: seek and find the methods where the teacher teaches less but they who sit in the desks learn more. Let schools have less rush, less antipathy and less vain effort, but more well-being, convenience and permanent gain."*<sup>11</sup>

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