



## FEATURE

### The long road to excellence

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## The long road to excellence

*'If you don't know where you're going you'll end up somewhere else...' The big picture for effective learning and teaching in Edinburgh is drawn by Alison Kidd, the city's Quality Improvement Officer*

Our learners, whether they are children, young people or adults, are at the heart of our service. In education it is the people who make the difference for learning and in Edinburgh the commitment and professionalism of our staff have been critical to keeping us on the right track. Our collaborative working practices, programmes of continuous professional development and development of partnerships with home have formed the foundations for a proactive and dynamic approach for effective learning and teaching. Creating the right climate for motivating learners and the development of self-esteem are central to our efforts to ensure quality in every school and centre.

With this type of introduction, readers might well conclude that not only do we think that we are on the right track but that, in our opinion, we've got it cracked! Not so. We do know where we are going but if we are to be current and contemporary, our achievements will always be 'a work in progress'.

Critical to our 'work in progress' for effective learning and teaching was the development of our authority guidelines, *Learning for All*. The action learning, consultation, publication and launch of the guidelines in 2002 prompted all our schools and centres to revisit their own practice and policies for effective learning and teaching for all learners 3 - 18. At that time, the Assessment is for Learning programme (AifL) was in its infancy and *A Curriculum for Excellence* (ACfE) had not yet been conceived. However, the expertise of colleagues involved in the development of the guidelines has put us in an excellent position to embrace the pedagogy of AifL and the values, purposes and principles of ACfE.

Great, I hear you say, but what about the heart of our work - our learners? Where are we going now in terms of approaches which lead to successful learning experiences? Our guidance to schools and centres is based on research on social constructivism. It embodies the principles of learners actively building their understanding through scaffolding of their learning; it is embedded in effective and enjoyable classroom interactions. As with all our 'next steps', we identify the needs and agree our planning for improvement.

We started with direct interactive teaching.

There is a variety of planning models for effective direct interactive teaching and a wealth of advice and guidance which has stemmed from our understanding of the research of the last 10-15 years. Common features for direct interactive teaching involve phases which focus on overview, input, processing and review. We have encouraged our colleagues to reflect on their approaches to direct interactive teaching and how these can be used flexibly to enable our pupils to actively build and enjoy their learning whilst meeting curricular requirements. As Colin Rose (2001) says in *Strategies for Closing the Learning Gap*:

No matter how much fun or how stimulating the learning process becomes, it's also vital to work to a cohesive, step by step plan.

As with all our guidance, the professional judgement of our colleagues will determine the most appropriate methodology to meet the needs of our learners.

For us, the development and implementation of the AifL programme was timely and enabled us to build on our earlier work. The emphasis on formative assessment and a focus on key aspects such as shared learning intentions/success criteria, effective questioning and discussion, effective feedback and self/peer assessment enhanced our four-phase model for direct interactive teaching. Most importantly, it reinforced our commitment to providing successful learning experiences for all our pupils. Fundamental to our approach - and success - has been the sharing of our practice through continuing professional development (CPD), seminars, conferences, cluster meetings, local and national networks, steering groups, learning teams, to mention a few of the opportunities. Also fundamental has been our cross-sectoral approach and the importance of modelling what these approaches look like and sound like for all learners 3-18.

We have used SEED funding effectively to support us on our journey to excellence in *Assessment is for Learning*. However, the key to our success is the hard work of our colleagues and their enthusiastic development of networks which have effectively

supported collaborative and enjoyable learning experiences for staff. The commitment (voluntary) of these colleagues has often been beyond the call of duty and much more than funding levels have afforded; it is a testament to their commitment to enhancing the learning experiences for their pupils.

And our next steps? What will we do next and how will we get there? Assessment as learning - personal learning planning - and assessment of learning, including 'sharing the standard' constitute our 'work in progress' at the current time. It is early days with these priorities. Nevertheless, the impact of ensuring that all learners have an entitlement to personal learning planning, i.e., regular dialogue with others, staff and parents on 'How am I doing? How do I know? What will I do next and how will I get there?' is already improving success in learning. In addition, cluster developments in 'sharing the standard' through activities such as local moderation are enhancing the planning and quality of learning experiences to improve achievement for pupils.

Encouraging a 'structure' for learning and using assessment more effectively to inform learning and next steps have helped us to make significant progress. However, this does not ensure that successful learning will take place for all learners. Our consultative learning and teaching steering group, together with reflection and debate with interauthority colleagues, have helped us to develop our big picture for effective learning and teaching.

As a result, Edinburgh colleagues have recently been exploring a variety of approaches to empower learners in developing and enhancing their thinking. How many times have we all said 'Now I'd like you to think about that' without modelling what thinking looks like, sounds like?

Pupils need a toolkit of thinking strategies ... Unless these strategies are made explicit we cannot really claim to be teaching pupils to become effective independent, lifelong learners. (Caviglioli & Harris, p.2)

Currently we are working with a consultancy who are supporting our efforts to make thinking more explicit and effective. Planning a variety of events has prompted action and we look forward to our interauthority thinking seminar which will share approaches such as model learning, cooperative learning and Feuerstein's instrumental enrichment. At the same time, we will be widening our networks of staff as learners and hope to make use of electronic communities to sustain our action

learning. Developments such as these are helping us to encourage deeper learning so that our learners can become more successful, confident, effective and responsible.

A final element in our current 'big picture' is our work in developing an emotionally literate approach. There is now much evidence to suggest that those who have developed their emotional literacy and can manage their emotional wellbeing and relationships with others have the best chance in life and are most likely to perform well in most tasks.

Our philosophy is based on one of the tenets of the School of Emotional Literacy: 'If you feel good, you will learn well' (Morris, 2006).

That's a given, you may well be thinking. It's how you try to achieve this for learners - and that's all of us - that counts. The work we are doing is in its early stages but is building on our other successes. Our success criteria encompass adopting an emotionally literate approach to the content of most lessons and to the process of all. Neat phrasing, but what does it mean? We have begun by focusing on the quality of feedback as part of our Aifl developments. Key colleagues across our five neighbourhoods are exploring the quality and impact of feedback on learners and learning. We also have whole school approaches to emotional literacy being piloted with good progress being made. For our staff, coaching in emotional literacy leadership and a teacher empathy programme complement the other developments.

The strategic direction for effective learning and teaching in Edinburgh summarised here is of course part of a much bigger picture where many colleagues and developments are working towards the best for our learners. I don't think we'll be ending up 'somewhere else' and I'm sure that the Japanese proverb sums up our progress: 'None of us is as smart as all of us'.

## References

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