

Observing [supplementary chapter]

Children and young people as learners

This supplementary chapter serves as an antidote to the temptation to let national curricula expectations drive professional practice. Rather than simply ‘delivering’ the curriculum to pupils, it suggests that teachers should learn about children’s learning by listening and observing. The pressure of contemporary education policies may make this difficult, but it remains vital to authentic teaching and learning. The argument is rehearsed here by Mandy Swann, who also suggests a very worthwhile Reflective Activity.

The best way to learn about learning is by watching children do it.

In an age where teachers are very often encouraged to focus on predetermined learning outcomes and test results, it can be all too easy to fail to see what is actually happening. In particular, if we assume that we know in advance what children will learn, the capacity to be surprised and excited by the essential unpredictability of children’s learning is lost.

When we really look closely at what children actually do when they are learning, there is so much more to see than the outcome, and what there is to see is more fascinating and informative.

Observing children to learn about learning

Our first example is drawn from a fascinating book *Thinking through Teaching* (Hart, 2000) in which Susan Hart explores the experiences of primary and secondary teachers, who were working in pairs in mainstream schools. They focused intently, for one year, on the learning of specific children whose progress was giving cause for concern.

The pace of life in classrooms means that teachers necessarily develop the capacity to make rapid judgements about children’s learning. Hart argues that, alongside this capacity, they must also develop the habit of reviewing and reflecting on what happens in the classroom for individual learners, to reflect on the judgements they make about children and about learning ‘especially when these reflect negatively upon children’s qualities and capabilities’ (Hart, 2000: 2). This is because, as Hart shows, teachers’ capacity to learn from their own experience is an important source of their creative power to support children’s learning.

The following extract focuses on the experience of Costas and Emer, a Year 1 child and his teacher, while everybody was clearing up after a morning session, just before breaking for lunch.

Exemplar I The trouble with Costas, Hart (2000: 2)

Emer [the teacher] asked for a volunteer to take a game down the corridor to the library and put it on the table there. Unusually, six-year-old Costas was the first to raise his hand. Pleased at this initiative, Emer gave him the box. He chose a partner to go with him, and off the two boys went.

Five minutes later, realising that they had not returned, she went to the classroom door to look for them. To her surprise, there they were outside the door, still holding the box. ... She asked what they were supposed to be doing with the game. No reply. She rephrased her question. Costas shifted about uneasily and started explaining how to play the game. He seemed to be totally confused. Emer explained again, slowly and carefully, what she wanted them to do, and this time, thankfully, the errand was successfully accomplished.

Hart describes how Emer's initial, spontaneous reaction was to suppress an impatient sigh, see Costas' action as confirmation of her view of him as a child who 'never listens to instructions' and 'is in a world of his own a lot of the time', and to explain what she wanted again. Hart reveals how Emer reviewed what had happened as she walked down the corridor some minutes later and presents the plausible alternative interpretations she arrived at after some thoughtful moments.

Alternative interpretations

- The game was Costas' favourite, had he heard an invitation to play the game?
- Perhaps it wasn't that he didn't listen, but that his excitement and desire to play influenced what he thought she was going to say.
- Perhaps he didn't hear her words clearly because of the noise and activity of clearing up.
- Had Emer assumed that because she knew it was lunchtime the children also knew it was lunch time and therefore time to put the game away, rather than play it?
- Children often went to the library with a teacher to play a game.
- Why did the teacher ask for two children if the task was not to play the game but to put it away?
- Costas' confusion is understandable if he was beginning to realise from Emer's suppressed sigh and questioning that he had somehow failed her but didn't know what he had done.
- ...

Adapted from Hart (2000) - for a full analysis see Hart's Chapter 1.

Hart explains that 'it took Emer only a few moments to do the thinking described here. Yet doing so fulfilled a vital responsibility towards Costas, enabling her to question rather than reinforce a negative view of his learning. This changed perception, in turn, helped to bring about a subtle shift in the dynamics of her relationship with him.' (p. 3).

There is much for the reflective teacher to learn from this tiny incident. Costas is learning a good deal, but it is not the rich learning we would hope for. Here is a child trying to make sense of what is required of him within his own frames of reference. He is learning to put up his hand to get a hearing, to do what his teacher tells him, to try to answer the teacher's questions even if they don't make sense to him, to use all the clues he can get, including all his past experiences, to seek his teacher's approval. Costas tries to make sense of this interaction with his teacher, he imbues the incident with personal meaning, but is seen losing trust in his own understanding. We can also see how, at school, children are learning in the social world of the institution. They learn from everything around them – the rules, practices and routines of the school – as well as from the planned curriculum. Willes (1983: 83) in her study of young children starting school and learning the rules of a reception class summarises the task of the learner during whole group discussions in some classrooms in a way that you may feel is caustic and critical, but it is certainly challenging:

"It is necessary to accept adult direction, to know that you say nothing at all unless the teacher indicates that you may, to know that when your turn is indicated you must use whatever clues you can find and make the best guess you can."

Here we can see the importance of teachers adopting a 'credit approach' to observations and of striving to understand from the child's point of view. As explained at the start of Chapter 4 of *Reflective Teaching*, a credit approach 'sees children as rich, strong, powerful learners'. For teaching and learning, it is the equivalent of the behavioural strategy of 'catch 'em being good!'. In a nutshell, it is about the advantages of teachers having a positive disposition and of consistently seeking to build from what each child can already do and understand.

Conversely, the example also hints at the dangers of leaving assumptions unchallenged and of not questioning (especially negative or deficit) interpretations of what children do. Assumptions and interpretations affect teachers' choices and, left unchallenged, this teacher's initial interpretation could have negatively shape Costas' classroom experience, and his identity as a learner and as a member of the class group.

This powerful example shows how only a few moments of reflection can transform our view of children and the meaning of their learning.

In our second example we learn from Michael Armstrong (1980) who spent a year in a primary school observing the learning of a class of eight- and nine-year-old children. Together with their class teacher, he documented in fascinating detail the intellectual growth of the children. In the following extract, we draw alongside Armstrong as he observes Paul painting a live moth which he had brought in to school from home. This activity formed part of the whole class engagement in an 'intense inquiry into the natural world and how to represent it in art' (p. 170) which stretched across a whole term.

Exemplar II Boy drawing a moth, Armstrong (1980: 164-170)

... [Paul] sat down at the painting table, set the jam jar [containing the moth] beside him, stared into it and began drawing in pencil the outline he would later paint. ... First he drew the body, after an unsuccessful early attempt at the moth's wings. He drew it as he saw it, looking down into the jar ... Then he started again on the wings. He sketched in one wing quickly enough but the other proved more difficult. He was anxious to make the wings symmetrical but couldn't seem to manage it ... I noticed him using a ruler to try and measure the length of the wing which he had already drawn, so that he could get the other wing exactly right. But even this presented a problem, for it wasn't easy to decide where precisely to measure from. I noticed him trying out various measurements and seeming dissatisfied with each. "I can't get it exact" he kept muttering to himself ... Then he asked me where he should place the moth's eyes. Looking down at the creature in the jar I felt that the eyes were not visible from the angle from which he had chosen to draw the moth, but Paul insisted, and added an eye, in perspective, at either side of the head: curved crescents that looked immediately convincing ... Paul worked slowly at [the painting], with bouts of disillusion and occasional demands for help, and with a few longish pauses ... [the next day] Paul completed his painting. He had taken the moth home last night in its jar ... He had let the moth go, he said, but it had stayed in the jar. I asked whether it might be a good idea to take it out of the jar to let it free. He had done so, he replied, but the moth had not moved except to shuffle along. ... now he retouched [the yellow veins painted on the wings yesterday] before sitting back to think about what to paint next. ...

This extract is bursting with learning for the attentive teacher to see. The richness of Paul's self-chosen, self-directed activity is reflected in his learning; the experience of sketching and painting the moth, spread over three days, was an extraordinarily rich opportunity for Paul's learning. Scrutiny of the natural world, observation and recording real life from first-hand experience are vital sources of intellectual growth; in this extract we can see a child applying every power at his disposal – mathematical, scientific, artistic – to this rich opportunity to learn. The table below summarises some of the learning visible in this child's sustained engagement in painting a moth.

Some of the intellectual powers the child brings to his moth painting

Mathematical powers

- Scale and proportion, calculation
- Symmetry
- Measurement, accuracy, trying out various measurements

Scientific powers

- Observational powers
- Segments and layers of the wings
- Experimenting, trying, asking for help, collaborating
- Perspective
- Keeping and freeing the moth

Artistic powers

- Shades of colour, blending, contrasting

- Moving from the freedom and roughness of impressionistic sketching (immediate responses helped by previous precision drawings) to accuracy in painting helped by extended experience of study and drawing (p. 169).
- Colour mixing, observation of wing colours, texture, veins
- Extending his technical skill

Powerful learner characteristics

- Persistence: painting for a long time, disillusion, struggle, success
- Thinking, observing, deciding, experimenting
- Thought and action as appropriation of knowledge

Adapted from Armstrong (1980: 164-70). See Armstrong for a full analysis.

The credit approach to observation makes it possible for us to see so much more than a predetermined end point, objective or standard. It enables us to focus on the processes of learning, on what learners actually do as well as what they ultimately attain. There are many more lessons for the reflective teacher to draw from this small extract. We can see the growth of understanding simultaneously in a number of different directions - learning is neither linear, nor confined by subject boundaries. Children do not progress from rung to rung of a ladder neatly progressing through curricular programmes, nor do they only think mathematically in a maths lesson, or scientifically in science. As we have seen, they draw on the powers at their disposal in any given opportunity to learn.

Michael Armstrong does not see teaching and learning as a process in which knowledge is a commodity passed, intact, from the teacher, who already knows it, to the learner who does not. In his view, the learner is essentially active in the process of acquiring knowledge, which he does not simply swallow, and possibly forget, but, in Armstrong's term - 'appropriates'. This means that he makes it his own, in ways and practices of his own invention. "Knowledge as appropriation" is a powerful conceptualisation of what goes on when active, strong learners encounter – and try to understand – aspects of the beautiful, fascinating, challenging world we all live in. Armstrong sees the growth of the intellect as a 'consequence of a child's successive attempts to appropriate knowledge through sustained practice' (p. 170). He argues that this happens in any form of thought – art, science, mathematics, literature. In this example we see a child using painting, enriched by his mathematical and scientific knowledge and understanding, as a means of expressing his growing understanding of the natural world. Furthermore, we also learn from Armstrong about the importance of offering children a range of media through which they can represent and express their knowledge and understanding - not only writing which, in some classrooms, dominates the opportunities that children are offered for representing and expressing their learning.

In our third example we turn to the realm of a child's life outside school to learn about learning from Steven and his family, as observed by Maddock (2006) who researched children's learning with their families, in their homes and communities. In this extract we explore the opportunities for learning afforded by a river boat and can see the contrasting learning agendas of Steven and his parents.

Exemplar III Boy on a river boat, Maddock (2006: 159)

Steven's family own a small river boat and spend their weekends and holidays on Board. They camp at sites along the river bank so, as Steven's mother puts it, they 'have to learn to talk to each other'. At home she tends to: 'leave them to it, don't disturb them if they're quiet and getting on with something' which gives her time in a very busy schedule to get on with other things. On the boat the family also play games together such as 'Roll It', 'Beetle Drive', 'Hangman', 'Silly drawings', 'Uno', and 'Jenga' ... Steven helps with the preparation of the boat at the beginning of the season which involves antifouling and paint work; when underway he has 'responsibility' for opening locks and jumping off at the front with a rope and tying up. [Steven's experiences on the boat, over the years, include] towing others who have broken down, getting stuck in high water and needing to lower the level of the boat in the waterline by packing lots of people on board to increase the weight thus getting the boat under a bridge, steering ... and fishing for pike from the boat. Steven's father is very sociable and 'talks to everybody and invites them to eat', often 'two old people [can be found on

board] in deck chairs with burgers and a bottle of wine'. So 'everything changes at summer' when the family 'do outdoor things', often from the boat, such as bike riding, camping, volley ball, swing ball, golf, hockey and cricket.

It is clear that Steven's mother is providing her young son with many worthwhile opportunities to learn. There is much that Steven can learn from these possibilities for cognitive growth during the family games, acquiring the skills of preparing, maintaining and controlling the boat, opportunities for social growth with members of the family and their guests. Furthermore, in the emotional domain, Steven's mother intended for these experiences to build his confidence.

Maddock describes how 'just as a teacher, planning a task, creates activities which are intended to lead learners towards the acquisition of specific knowledge, skills, concepts and understandings' an analysis of the opportunities for learning afforded by the river boat could lead to assumptions about what specific learning resulted for Steven – for example, elements of mathematics, literacy, the science of water and flotation, creativity, problem-solving, the vocabulary of boats and so on. But Maddock also reveals how the reflective teacher can see much, much more by listening to what the child has to say about this activity and putting themselves in the child's shoes in order to see the activity from the child's perspective.

"However, when Steven discusses boats, his personal priorities are rather different. He tells me about his dinghy, and the outboard engine he saved up for and bought himself, and about taking his bicycle on the boat. He prioritizes those activities which he does alone. He is described by his mother as 'lacking confidence', 'unsure of himself' and does 'not [have] good self-esteem'. This is the image presented to the bystander, of a child who 'hides behind his lifejacket' ... Can a child who can take himself alone on water, in control of a petrol-driven engine, be categorized as 'unconfident'?" (p. 159)

By taking this viewpoint, Maddock explains, the personal learning of the child comes into view. Steven appropriates the opportunities for learning that his parents have provided and turns them into something that is personally rewarding and meaningful to him; from this perspective, another dimension of the learner emerges. This example demonstrates how, whenever a teacher plans for particular opportunities for learning through specific tasks and activities, the learning that results is wholly unpredictable, but, nevertheless, can be observed by the teacher who is watching and listening closely, in tune with the learner. Learning, as Maddock puts it, does not exist inside classroom activities. Children will not necessarily learn what we have planned. Instead, their learning is coloured by the identities and biographies that individual children bring with them to the opportunity to learn and is refracted through their unique engagement with what their teachers offer them. Maddock's study shows us that children can transform opportunities for learning into something that is personally rewarding and meaningful; and each child, therefore, may learn something different from the same classroom activity.

Conclusion

In this supplementary chapter we have offered three examples of children learning that give a flavour of the benefits, to both child and teacher, of looking intently at learning to see not simply what we anticipate and expect to find, but also for the unanticipated, the unexpected, to see what children are showing and telling us. As Eisner puts it:

Learning to see what we have learned not to notice remains one of the most critical and difficult tasks of educational connoisseurs. Everything else rests on it. (1991: 77)

We urge you to read the whole texts from which these extracts are drawn, as there is much more to see than the tasters we have given here. In Chapters 11 and 12 of *Reflective Teaching* there are case studies of secondary school students engaging in similar learning experiences, albeit with more specified curricula. In particular, the importance of 'dialogic teaching' is emphasised— a process which builds explicitly on the need to listen, observe and respond appropriately.

Work of this sort can help to strengthen and deepen our capacity to reflect on learning, drawing on increasingly rich funds of professional knowledge. It would be valuable to try taking on this positive and empathic frame of reference. Reflective Activity 1.8 in the *Reflective Teaching* text book suggests how this might be done.

Bibliography

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