

Strategies

As we shared and analysed our experiences as a group, we gradually built up a picture of the range of strategies that people thought were being successful in creating opportunities for dialogue and reflection relating to *Learning Without Limits* core ideas and principles. Discussion also focused on how we were engaging with and seeking to manage the tensions and complexities involved. Among the wide range of practices adapted to people's differing roles and the needs of their differing professional contexts, we were gradually able to recognise common themes and appreciate how *LWL* core principles were also reflected in our work with adults.

Co-agency

In *LWL* pedagogy, the principle of co-agency is centrally concerned with teachers using their power to encourage and enable children to use *their* power to enhance learning capacity. A corresponding theme of empowerment *not* imposition was also strongly reflected in all the strategies described by colleagues, whatever the context and prior experience of the colleagues they were working with. People's deep commitment to the values underpinning *LWL* core ideas and principles necessarily implied a default acceptance of colleagues as active thinkers and learners in their own right, not recipients of ready-formed ideas. They must necessarily have time and opportunities to do their own thinking and arrive at their own decisions about what to do to enhance learning in their classrooms. To the extent that the transformability-based model of pedagogy was referred to directly, it was as a tool for thought and reflection on practice. There was no place for downloadable lesson-plans or step-by-step practical tips for creating a *Learning Without Limits* classroom.

Implicit in the strategies adopted, then, was a shared understanding that our task, as people with responsibility for supporting colleagues, was to help create conditions that would enable people to do their own learning. This was achieved in many different ways, including providing opportunities to learn by example, exposure to others' thinking and practice through structured opportunities to share and analyse teaching experiences, co-planning and co-teaching, opportunities to observe colleagues, and sharing ideas for people to try out and evaluate for themselves.

At both Bradford College and the University of Hertfordshire, staff embodied *LWL* core ideas and principles in the learning environments they created for student teachers, so that the teachers would experience these at first hand and have the opportunity to draw parallels between their own experience of learning in college and how they were approaching teaching in their own classrooms. Two Advanced Skills teachers, one working in the primary sector and one in the secondary, both in different ways created opportunities for colleagues to have new experiences that would raise questions and suggest new possibilities: the secondary teacher through cross-curricular events that allowed young people to be seen in a different light, and the primary teacher by inviting colleagues into her classroom and co-teaching in the colleague's classroom to see how children would respond to being offered more choices in their learning.

PGDE students following the elective module at the University of Aberdeen were encouraged to use *LWL* core ideas and principles as a framework for reflection on their experiences on school placement. When they met together for course sessions, students recounted relevant experiences and together they explored the implications of these through the lens of *LWL* ideas, and drew out the implications for their teaching. It was a requirement of the course that students work in co-operative groups, thinking together and preparing together a presentation of their learning assessed by themselves, their peers and tutors in the final sessions of the course. Tutors stressed the importance of starting out from where people were, with small steps, asking ‘how could we begin to do things differently?’ Using practical examples and case studies was important, tutors argued, not as blueprints for practice but as a source of inspiration and as a means of building people’s sense that it *is* possible to do things differently.

Since the language we use has a profound effect in shaping our thinking, people also stressed the importance of developing a shared language to replace the language of ‘ability’ differences when talking about children’s learning and sharing ideas about pedagogy. Since the language of differential ‘ability’ is so ubiquitous, it was not always possible or appropriate for issues of ability labelling to be addressed directly, and this created many tensions for the team in managing everyday conversations. At Bradford College, course discussions in the 4-year QTS Primary Education with QTS degree included opportunities for student teachers to discuss and debate the impact of ability labelling in relation to their own experiences as learners, and in relation to research and literature. At the University of Hertfordshire, a booklet for student teachers incorporating tasks to be undertaken while on school placement using the language ‘planning for personalisation’ rather than differentiation by ‘ability’.

Trust

Strategies that reflect the principle of co-agency also necessarily imply trust in colleagues’ capacity to learn and develop their practice in ways that will enhance learning capacity *without* being told what to do or think. The assumption is that colleagues’ are committed to doing the very best they can for children, and that given the right conditions, they will be able to use this freedom wisely to everyone’s benefit. The ‘right’ conditions will necessarily vary, from context to context, and from person to person. Working out from people’s expressed concerns or focusing on the learning of particular children provide points of connection and allow colleagues to take control and shape the discussion from their own experience, knowledge and commitments.

However, trust in people’s capacity to learn and willingness to try out new ways of working also needs to take account of the many counter pressures on staff in schools to think and teach in particular ways, resulting from the dominant discourse of levels and attainment-led objectives as a framework for planning and teaching. In schools where there is a strong expectation that all colleagues will follow the guidance set out in national policy documents, it may not be wise or feasible for individuals to choose – and for us to encourage them - to depart from accepted models of ‘good practice’ even where these conflict with their own values. People described their uncertainties in relation to opening up dialogue or drawing attention to alternative ways of working in situations where people were isolated, inexperienced or unsupported, and especially with student teachers on

school placement. We felt that in many ways individual teachers' freedom to make their own choices with respect to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment had decreased in the period since the first *LWL* study was carried out.

We were gradually moving to the conclusion that a key condition for individual teachers' learning in the current context was active support and encouragement *at leadership level*, for example at the level of the department (in a secondary school) or at the level of curriculum planning team or whole-school policies and principles (in a primary school). Without this, and the learning opportunities afforded by it, teachers' attempts to make space to try out new ideas on their own initiative sometimes led to anomalies such as trying to 'do *Learning Without Limits* on a Thursday afternoon, with a lower-attainers group'; or to the adoption of specific strategies associated with *Learning Without Limits* pedagogy (e.g. giving children choices) without engaging fully with the principles that underlie and inform teachers' decision making.

One Head of Mathematics, in the research carried out by the University of Oxford, described the forms this support and encouragement took in her department. Extended time during department meetings was given over to discussing and planning mathematics activities; cover was provided so that people could observe each other's teaching and meet to plan; she provided resources and packs of materials that people might not otherwise come across for them to try out and discuss; she also stressed how important it was for people to know they have full permission to explore new approaches and take risks with new possibilities. One way of underlining this was to offer colleagues in her department an alternative planning sheet focused on the mathematical thinking that teachers hoped to foster through their work around a specific topic rather than sequences of task designed to achieve pre-specified learning objectives. Her trust in her colleagues' capacity to use the support and encouragement available to them was evident when she summed up her approach as follows: 'making a defined space within which people can enjoy working together and become their best professional selves: excellent, committed, developing, enthusiastic teachers'.

Everybody

The strategies adopted also clearly embodied a commitment to one aspect of the principle of 'everybody' – the idea that learning is at its most powerful when it is a social and collective experience in which everyone can take part and to which everyone contributes. In almost all the examples discussed, strategies adopted involved either *creating* groups to work together on the understanding that the learning that becomes possible when people come together to share ideas and practices is qualitatively different to the learning that individuals can achieve on their own; or, *transforming* existing groups of individuals (e.g. teachers following a course of initial training) into genuine learning communities by creating collaborative tasks, group structures and fostering an ethos that facilitated mutual support and sharing of ideas.

More problematic in our experience of working with adults was the idea embodied by the principle of 'everybody' that the core idea of 'transformability' (and consequently the principles of co-agency and trust) applies to *everybody* without exception. We did sometimes encounter colleagues in our places of work whose expressed values and judgements of children appeared initially to be so deeply out

of sympathy with our own beliefs and values that it was difficult to imagine that our efforts to open up dialogue or create the 'right conditions' could suffice for them to undergo what seemed to us to amount to a fundamental shift in values and practice. It was challenging to stay with the belief that, adult or child, *everyone* is able to learn and develop; no one should ever be written off as a lost cause. Staying with it, however, did lead eventually to an important shift of perspective, which we came to call 'positioning alongside'. Rather than focusing on how to enable our colleague to change – in the direction of our values naturally! – the challenge was for us to move our own stance, to position ourselves *alongside* rather than in opposition to our colleague, and to search out common ground between us, in order to make that the basis for dialogue. Almost always common ground could be found in a shared concern for the learning, well-being and progress of individual children and from here a constructive conversation could begin.

This 'positioning alongside' also helped to remind us, moreover, that the shift from the fixed-ability mindset to a commitment to transformability is not an all or nothing, once and for all movement. These are not, in fact, two fundamentally opposed positions, where the presence of one necessarily excludes the other. The two may co-exist. We may find, for example, that we hold fixed ability views of our own capacities in some areas but not others; of our own capacities but not those of other people (or vice versa); for some pupils we teach but not others; for adults but not children; of children in our classes but not our own children. The principle of 'everybody' reminds us not only that everyone can learn, but that everyone needs to keep on learning. There is always, *for all of us*, work to do on this, no matter how deeply held our convictions, because there are so many counter-pressures that can move us, against our better judgement, towards the ability mindset – the focus on individual tracking and levelling, the pressures to predict learning in terms of levels, the common-sense arguments about ability-grouping. These pressures have to be resisted by deliberate, conscious acts of mind, what Steiner teachers call 'inner work'. They say that 'the ability to see and think in flexible, non-dogmatic ways helps the teacher avoid unhelpful categorisations, labelling.' and stress that it requires 'a constant inner questioning, a willingness to see the child anew each day'. Clearly 'inner work' to develop this ability is just as crucial when we are working with adults as when working directly with children.