The Learning without Limits Project: Key Ideas and Principles

There are some details with respect to the core ideas and principles briefly outlined on the First LWL Project.

'Ability'

Ability labels explain differences in young people's learning and attainment by invoking fixed differences in intellectual endowment. A person described as being of 'low ability' now, in the present, is assumed to have more limited potential than others who are judged to be 'average' or 'more able' and the expectation is that these differences will persist and be reflected in comparable differences in academic performance in the future. The present is merely a staging post on the way towards a future whose outcomes are already broadly laid down; they are both predictable, and predicted, in the present.

'Transformability'

Teachers whose practice is guided by the idea of transformability, on the other hand, are convinced that the present does and must play a pivotal role in determining the path of future development. The future is unknowable and unpredictable because it is being actively created in the present. Everything that happens has an effect, for better or worse, on young people's learning capacity. By understanding the forces that shape and limit capacity to learn in the present, and through the choices they make, teachers can exploit the possibilities available to them for enabling all young people to become better learners.

The concept of learning capacity

Commitment to transformability is inspired and sustained by a concept of learning capacity that is very different from concepts of ability.

It recognises that external forces as well as internal resources and states of mind are constitutive of learning capacity. The range and quality of learning opportunities provided, and the relationships that support and shape learning opportunities, interact with internal subjective states to create and constrain

capacity to learn in any given situation. For more detail, see [pdf] Diagram 1: Forces affecting learning capacity.

It has a collective as well as an individual dimension. Capacity to learn is contained within and constituted by how a group of young people operate and work together as a group, and by the opportunities and resources made available to them as a group.

It includes internal resources and states of mind in addition to the purely cognitive-intellectual. The capacity to learn in any situation is affected, for example, by emotional states such as fear or excitement or by young people's sense of social acceptance and belonging in the school or class group.

The cognitive elements of learning capacity are not mysterious inner entities, but are skills and understandings that can be, and have been, learned.

Learning capacity is transformable because the forces that shape it, individually and collectively, are, to an extent, within teachers' control.

Transforming learning capacity: the core purposes of teaching

When we studied the practices of the nine teachers in the LWL project, we found that they were working to transform learning capacity in two ways ([pdf] Diagram 2: The core purposes of teaching).

On the one hand, they set out to do whatever was within their power to oppose and lift limits on learning by expanding and enhancing learning opportunities, based on their current understandings of the external forces that shape learning capacity;

On the other hand, recognising that their own efforts would be in vain unless young people chose to take up the learning opportunities available to them, they used their own power to try to build, restore and strengthen the positive states of mind needed if young people were to choose to engage and sustain the effortful activity that worthwhile, personally meaningful learning requires.

The teachers were convinced that they could positively affect young people's choices because they knew that young people's learning was profoundly influenced by every aspect of their school experiences. One of the reasons why the teachers rejected ability labelling was because of the damage they had seen it do to young people's self-belief, sense of personal

competence, attitudes, expectations and hopes for the future. The teachers' belief in their power to transform young people's learning capacity was supported and sustained by their understanding of the connections between classroom conditions and the states of mind (cognitive, affective and social) that affect young people's ability and willingness to invest in learning (for examples of these connections, click here – [pdf] Diagram 3: Teachers' power to make a difference). They put this understanding to work at the heart of their teaching, making choices for their classroom practice on the basis of what they believed would enhance the choices young people themselves make in the exercise of their own agency.

The core pedagogical principles

We identified three pedagogical principles that were common to all nine teachers, despite their very different contexts and approaches. These principles were the filter for their classroom decision-making, the means by which they ensured that choices made before, during and after work with young people in the classroom, were best able to fulfil the core purposes outlined above.

1. Co-agency

The principle of co-agency asserts that a central criterion in all decision-making is whether choices do or do not increase:

- young people's active participation in and control over their learning;
- their positive sense of themselves as competent thinkers and learners;
- their ability and willingness to engage in and commit themselves to the learning opportunities provided.

The principle of co-agency leads teachers to choose classroom activities and experiences for their potential to increase scope for children to influence and shape the direction of learning, to make choices and take responsibility for their own learning, to learn with and from one another rather than relying mainly on the teacher's direction and input. Unlike ability-based teaching, where the onus is essentially upon the teacher to plan for differentiation of tasks, resources and outcomes, teaching informed by the principle of co-agency recognises that diversity in learning is achieved by what both teachers and young people contribute to the learning process. What young people will learn from any particular set of tasks or activities cannot be tightly pre-specified because it will reflect not just what the teacher has prepared and anticipated for their learning but also what they put in, what they bring

and what they make of the learning opportunities that the teacher provides. Opportunities for sustained, purposeful dialogue between teacher and learners, and between learners themselves, are also of crucial importance, for it is through talk that young people have the chance to elaborate and develop their thinking and make ideas meaningful in their own terms.

2. Everybody

The principle of 'everybody' asserts teachers' fundamental responsibility and commitment to acting in the interests of everybody. It works hand-in-hand with the principle of co-agency to ensure that teachers' efforts to strengthen and transform learning capacity are applied fairly and equally to everyone As the teachers helped us to understand, the opposite of 'everybody' is not 'nobody' but 'some people'. Expectations are set high for everybody, not just some people. Everybody, without exception, can learn and can become a better learner. Decisions about what to do to enhance the states of mind that support learning must be taken in the interests of everybody, and aim to benefit everybody equally. The principle of 'everybody' brings into play teachers' understanding that learning capacity has a collective as well as an individual dimension. When planning, teachers make choices that will increase the potential for everybody to take part in and contribute to the collective learning experience. Consequently they prefer tasks that are open and accessible to everybody. They avoid choices that could disadvantage or exclude some people. Teachers work hard to build the learning community, encouraging children to support and help one another: everybody must be valued, accepted, respected; everybody must feel that they belong, everybody must be recognised as having a unique contribution to make, everybody can learn with and from everybody else. All children's identities and diverse backgrounds need to be positively recognised and reflected in curriculum content and classroom resources.

3. Trust

Teachers make their choices, selecting the transforming alternative, from a basic position of trust. The nine teachers in our study all brought to their task an untouchable conviction that young people are to be trusted – trusted to make meaning of what they encounter in school and out of it, trusted to find relevance and purpose in relevant and purposeful activities, trusted to contribute to one another's learning, trusted to take up the teacher's

invitation to co-agency and to participate in the worthwhile activity of learning. This basic position of trust means that, when learners choose not to engage or appear to be inhibited in their learning, teachers re-evaluate their choices and practices in order to try to understand what might be hindering their participation and learning. Trust sustains teachers' belief that young people will choose to engage if the conditions are right, and so motivates their effort to go on searching for ways to reach out and make connections that will enable young people to learn more successfully. There is a fine line to tread between, on the one hand, communicating acceptance and appreciation of young people as they currently are and, on the other, creating conditions that will enable them to change, to find themselves able to transcend existing limits. The teachers appreciate that communication of interest, and willingness to listen and try to understand how the world looks through the eyes of young people can go a long way towards making such change possible.

4. Unpredictability

Since the original study was carried out, we have identified a fourth principle*, which had been implicit in the other three. We now consider that 'unpredictability' needs to be recognised as a distinctive principle in its own right because it enables teachers to follow through into practice their belief in the power of the present to affect the future, their awareness that the future is in the making in the present. Present attainments tell us something about the past, about children's prior educational experiences; they do not and cannot predict the future. There is no way of knowing how children's learning capacity might yet flourish if teachers can find ways to oppose and lift limits that have hindered development thus far, and create learning conditions that children find more enabling. So, in their decision-making, the teachers actively avoided practices that might foster and sustain self-fulfilling prophecies. Young people were seen, not as 'types' of learner, but as unique, complex individuals, who are constantly growing and changing in unpredictable ways. The teachers avoided pre-selecting children to undertake tasks with reduced expectations, preferring to offer an invitation to learn that was open, accessible and challenging for all young people. Guided by the three preceding principles, they understood that outcomes cannot be specified in advance because learning depends upon what learners bring, think and do when engaging in classroom activities and this cannot be predicted. The teachers trusted and expected young people to surprise them; they always kept an open mind, were constantly striving to

offer new experiences and to expand learners' horizons, and were consciously working to create conditions in which surprises were more likely to happen.

Working together

The four principles do not function in isolation from each other. Their power to contribute to the fundamental task of progressively enhancing young people's learning capacity depends upon the use of them in combination with the others. To see how all elements of the model connect, click here for [pdf] Diagram 4: Transforming Learning Capacity: an alternative approach to pedagogy.