

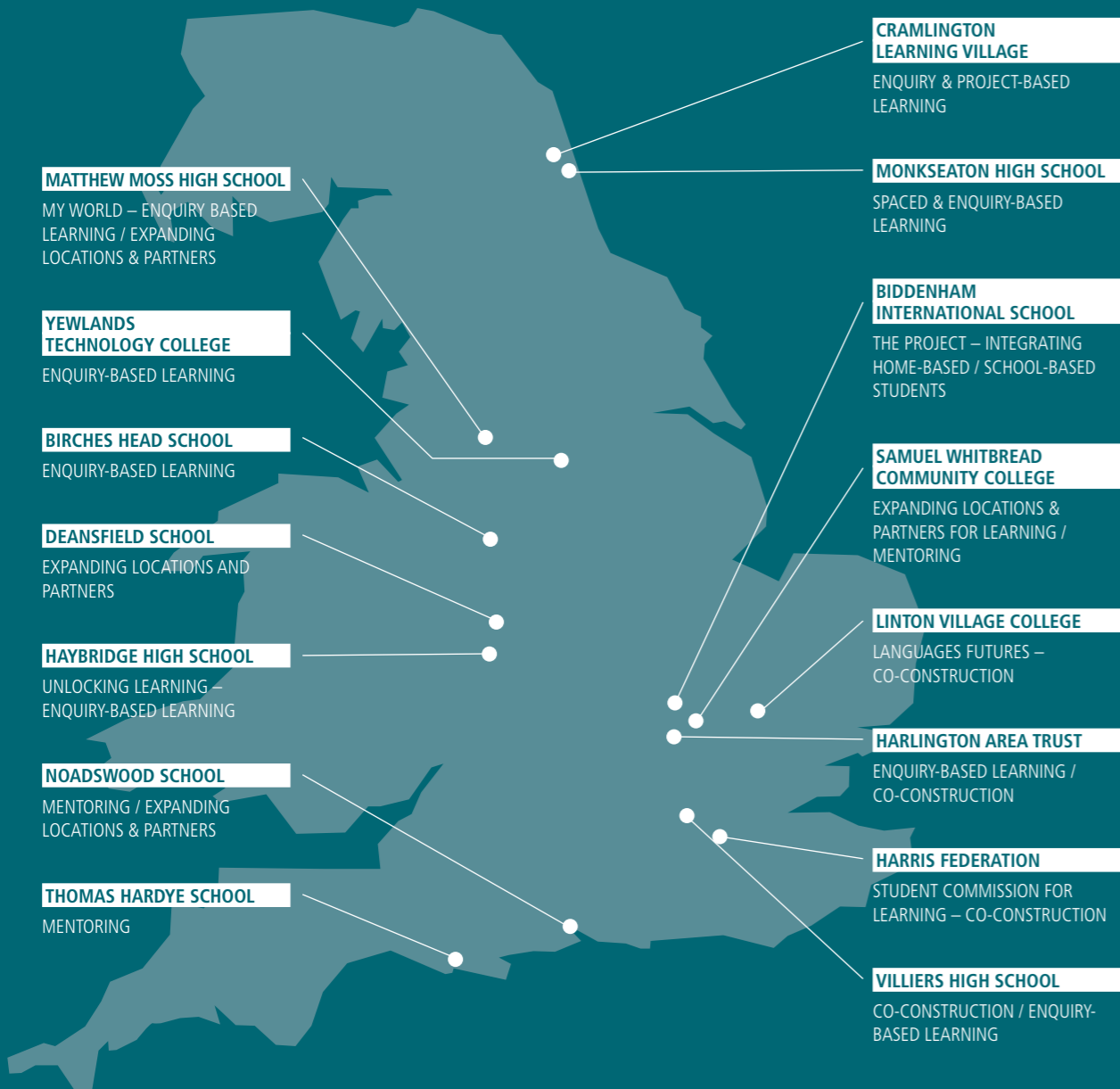
ENGAGEMENT / CO-CONSTRUCTION  
RELEVANCE / AUTHENTICITY  
LANGUAGE FOR LEARNING  
MENTORING / COACHING  
ENQUIRY BASED LEARNING  
EXPANDING PARTNERSHIPS  
INDEPENDENT LEARNER

# Learning Futures

Engaging students

.....  
DAVID PRICE

## LOCATION AND FOCUS OF LEARNING FUTURES SCHOOLS



“We’ve tinkered at the edge of education for years, but it’s fantastic to be involved in a radical innovative approach that is getting at the heart of how young people learn.”

TEACHER IN A LEARNING FUTURES SCHOOL

## ABOUT LEARNING FUTURES

The Learning Futures programme was set up in 2008, a partnership between the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Innovation Unit. The two organisations had previously worked together on the *Musical Futures* project, successfully documenting and scaling up radical new approaches to teaching and learning in secondary school music.

The principles and practices which informed *Musical Futures*\* have broadly shaped the design and development of Learning Futures. Our learning community (15 ‘sites’ comprising 40 schools) is testing out new ways to make secondary stage learning more engaging and effective. Their chosen innovations are diverse, including large-scale student consultations, mentoring programmes, enquiry-based learning experiences and strategies to accelerate learning.

In all, however, we seek to make the learning transferable, through the creation of practitioner materials which will support teachers in secondary classrooms, in adapting their pedagogy to the 21st century challenge of ensuring students’ deep engagement with learning. In facilitating this, we intend to support our sites in working with others so that a professional learning community can be established, and successful practices scaled-up. These pamphlets, however, represent work-in-progress, rather than conclusive findings. They will enable our schools to identify some common principles and

propositions, upon which we will subsequently build learning models and practitioner tools and materials.

We will make all materials freely available (in both copyright and cost) during 2010–12, and hope to recruit more schools in order to test their effectiveness and impact. If you would like to get involved in Learning Futures, please go to [www.learningfutures.org](http://www.learningfutures.org) and sign up to receive the regular e-newsletter. You can also contact us directly at: [info@learningfutures.org](mailto:info@learningfutures.org).

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The ideas contained within this pamphlet have been collaboratively developed by the Learning Futures project team, evaluation team, consultants and the 15 sites (listed opposite), taking part in the programme. We would like to thank all who have contributed to this first report of our findings so far.

Further pamphlets will be published in 2010 detailing our emerging findings on the first four themes central to Learning Futures:

- Enquiry-Based Learning
- Expanding Locations and Partners for Learning
- Co-Constructing Learning
- Mentoring

\* See [www.musicalfutures.org](http://www.musicalfutures.org) for further details



PHOTO: EMILIE HODGA

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*“We are in a position where we have to create engaging work for kids or we’re going to lose the battle for their hearts and minds. We have to be intentional about engagement.”*

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PHILLIP SCHLECHTY CENTRE FOR ENGAGEMENT

## INTRODUCTION

The Learning Futures programme, and its partner schools, have made student engagement the prime focus of our activities. In this we are not alone. Around the world, more attention is being paid to finding ways to tap into students’ interest in learning.

The reasons are not hard to find. Whilst the past decade has seen an overall improvement in school standards, more recently the upwards performance trend has stalled. Furthermore, it is widely felt that the accountability framework, which has been at the centre of all policy initiatives, has largely served to exacerbate disengagement. Whilst the current ‘template’ approach to teaching and learning (3-stage lesson plans et al) works well for some students, for others it has made lessons predictable and boring. Increasing numbers are voting with their feet, becoming truants and NEETs (not in Employment, Education or Training). Today’s student is also acutely aware of the contrast between the learning environment of the classroom (where copying from the board is still the most regularly reported task, according to students’) and their media-rich, socially-networked learning lives outside school.

There is real concern, therefore, that school improvement strategies demand ‘achievement’,

but at the expense of ‘interest’. The irony, for commentators like Alfie Kohn, is that ‘when interest appears, achievement usually follows’ . Until recently, however, improvement strategies have been reluctant to examine the connection between teaching and learning and student engagement, as long as results improve. We believe this is not simply a short-sighted strategy; it has fundamentally distorted the purpose of schooling. There is now a growing alliance of foundations, trusts and third-sector organisations involved in education, who argue that shifting our focus away from the instruments required to drive up standards, to how schools can make learning more engaging and enjoyable, will result in more young people excited and motivated about their learning, and bring about higher achievement\* .

This is the aim of the Learning Futures Programme and its 15 innovation ‘sites’ (comprising 40 schools): to have more young people actively and positively engaged with their learning, achieving better outcomes and retaining a commitment to learning beyond school. Our first pamphlet identified an aspiration of engaged learning as ‘learning which is deep, authentic and motivational’, and our schools are dedicated to that goal.

Inevitably, however, we need to revisit the concept of engagement, especially since, in the light of the work beginning in schools, our thinking has developed.

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\* See, for example the Whole Education Campaign ([www.wholeeducation.org](http://www.wholeeducation.org))

## LEARNING FUTURES AND ENGAGEMENT

Disengagement in UK schools has steadily increased during the past two decades, to the point where British students, according to OECD studies, now have some of the poorest attitudes towards learning in the world. The reasons behind disengagement are varied and complex, involving a host of social, familial and personal factors: poverty, low aspirations, mental and physical well-being, environmental and community factors, parental attitudes, etc.

There are clear links between these factors and disengagement. However, discussions around disengagement rarely give prominence to the young person's response to what is on offer in school. It is almost as though we have accepted the inevitability of learning as a cold shower: you're not expected to enjoy it, but it will do you good. The focus upon trying to remedy the ill-effects of 'disadvantage', through early intervention strategies, for example, are understandable, and important. But they tend to concentrate upon the visibly disengaged: persistent

truants, those with special educational or emotional needs, or those with behavioural problems.

However, as one recent study reported: "...looking simply at active signs of disengagement would underestimate the extent of disengagement among children and young people who passively withdraw from their education, by withdrawing cognitively or emotionally".<sup>3</sup>

Tackling disengagement is therefore an urgent priority for the considerably larger number of students whose



*"Lots of students enjoy learning but don't enjoy school. Maybe we can change that."*

YR 10 STUDENT COMMISSIONER HARRIS ACADEMY, PECKHAM

disengagement is less visible, but no less acute. Additionally, there is often a false connection made between achievement and engagement. We have recently seen a large number of students becoming 'disengaged achievers', performing well academically, keeping out of trouble, but rejecting further and higher education.

Many third sector organisations are doing highly innovative work at the margins with disengaged young people, but their impact usually remains there.

Within the Learning Futures programme, we are cognisant of the strong extraneous circumstances often at play in disengagement, but our primary focus is upon what is taught/learned and how it is taught/learned: the curriculum and pedagogy. Our schools are developing strategies which radically alter the nature and depth of learning relationships, and the learning environment. Underpinning these approaches is a belief that engagement comes before learning; without engagement, learning is, at best, transient and lacking depth.

### CASE STUDY

**Haybridge High School** in the West Midlands is, by OFSTED and performance standards, an exceptional school. In their last inspection they were judged 'outstanding' in every category. Their main impetus for becoming a Learning Futures school was to explore and develop a coherent approach to enquiry based learning which would enhance their students' learning experience whilst ensuring that they continued to achieve the best possible attainment outcomes. They recognise that for their students to succeed at the highest level, both at university and as life long professional learners, they must acquire the skills and attributes to equip them as successful global citizens of the 21st Century. Through their involvement in Learning Futures, they are committed to finding ways to make the curriculum and pedagogy powerfully engaging for all their students.

*"In every country there is a sizeable proportion of students who have high levels of literacy skills yet lack a sense of belonging at schools or have low levels of participation. Educators cannot presume that youths with average or above-average skills necessarily feel they belong at school or value schooling outcomes."*

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AT SCHOOL: A SENSE OF BELONGING AND PARTICIPATION: PISA STUDY 2003

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ENGAGEMENT?

Identifying and measuring engagement is often fraught with difficulty. A multitude of studies testify to the often confusing and overlapping nature of definitions. Despite this, in recent years, a consensus has emerged on the conceptual basis of engagement.

Three elements, initially viewed in isolation, but recently seen more holistically, have become widely accepted:

- Thinking/Cognitive
- Feeling/Emotional/Affective
- Acting/Behavioural/Operative

Variants to this exist (for example, the Canadian Education Association, has recently identified Social, Academic and Intellectual<sup>4</sup> as the three key elements) but there is broad agreement around models which seek to identify and measure how students think, feel and act within school.

So far, so good. Two problems, however, soon appeared for our Learning Futures sites. The first came when those three categories were viewed alongside the original Learning Futures domains:

The three-legged stool model most commonly adopted (Cognitive, Behavioural and Emotional)

is geared around directing the question 'are you engaged?' to the student only. Our belief, from the outset, has been that we are only likely to see deep, authentic and motivated learning when the responsibility for engagement lies with a broader set of partners, all seeking to engage in supporting learning – a 'done with', rather than 'done to' approach. Learning Futures is aiming not only for 'engaged students', but for engaged schools.

A second problem with the traditional model of engagement stems from its predominantly 'instrumental' applications: engagement as a vehicle to improve student performance, or discipline within school. Inevitably, such a mindset constrains success indicators within a 'compliance' model. Students are deemed to be engaged, for example, when/if they:

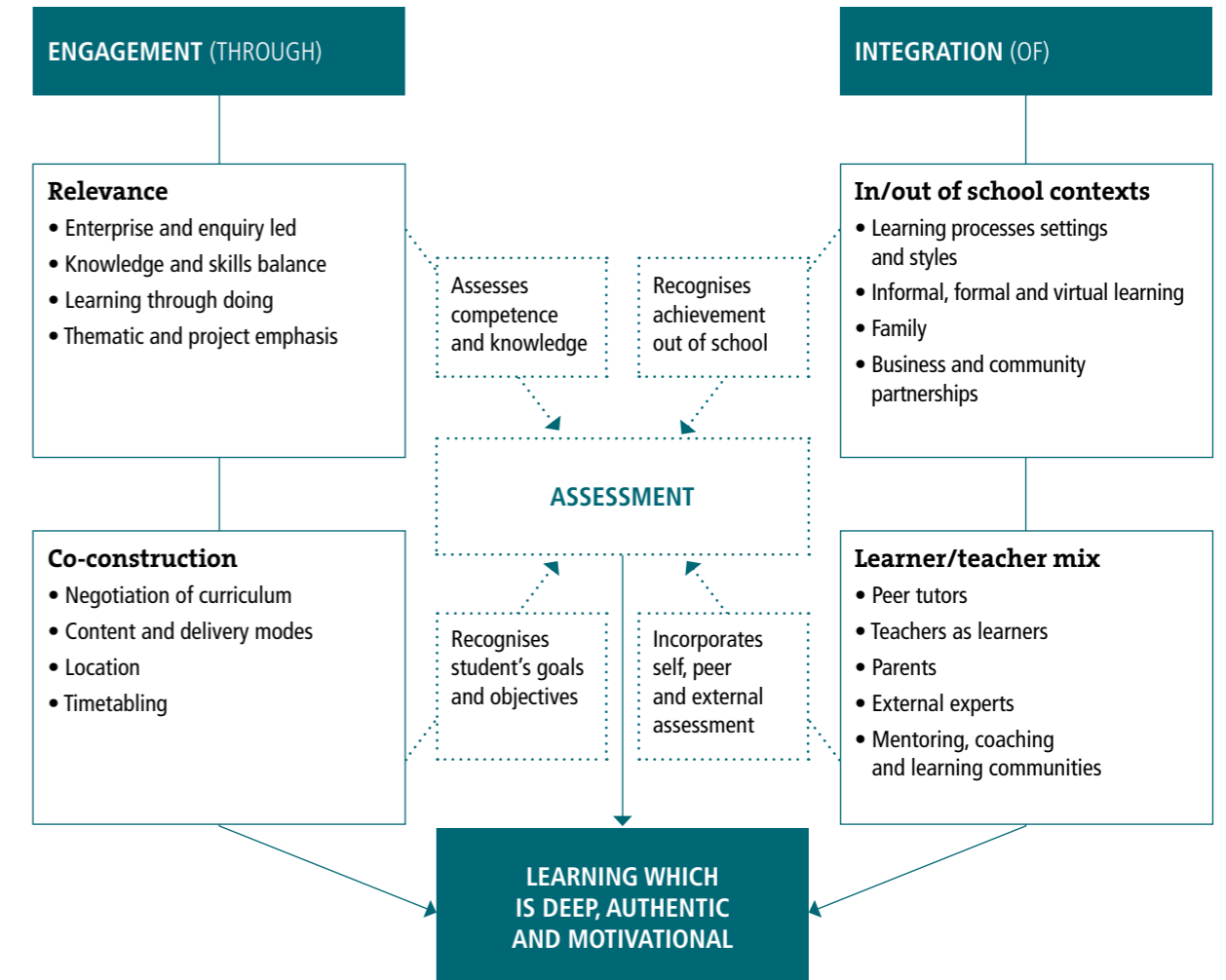
- Attend regularly;
- Conform to behavioural norms;
- Complete work in the manner requested and submit on time;
- Are 'on-task';
- Respond to questioning.

The schools taking part in Learning Futures have considerably greater aspirations for their students: beyond compliance, to a commitment to learning, for life. It is clear, therefore, that the conventional concept of engagement is inadequate.

*"Much of the discourse has been about disengagement on adult terms; engagement as defined by politicians, policy makers, and perhaps some teachers and parents. But actually tackling disengagement effectively means taking the time to understand what children and young people themselves find engaging, placing student voice at the centre of what they do."*

SONIA SODHA & SILVIA GUGLIELMI <sup>5</sup>

### THE ORIGINAL LEARNING FUTURES DOMAIN CONSIDERED IMPORTANT TO ACHIEVE ENGAGEMENT



## RE-FRAMING ENGAGEMENT

Based upon what is emerging from our Learning Futures sites, we would argue that schools should have ambitions beyond the compliance model of engagement, toward a lifelong commitment to learning.

Our working definition of ‘deep engagement’, developed in consultation with students and schools, is that it is learning which occurs when the learner:

- cares not just about the *outcome*, but also the development, of their learning;
- takes *responsibility* for their learning;
- brings discretionary *energy* to their learning task(s);
- can locate the *value* of their learning beyond school, and wishes to *prolong* their learning beyond school hours.

If these are the learner dispositions we should strive for, what then are the keys which can trigger deep engagement and motivation? By examining the designs for learning of our partner schools (in both

curriculum and pedagogy), we have observed deep engagement when one or more of the following characteristics is built into the experience. That is to say, where learning is:

- **Placed:** reaches, and has relevance to, students in the space that they inhabit, connecting with the student’s family/community and interests outside school;
- **Purposeful:** absorbs the student in actions of practical or intellectual value, fosters a sense of value and agency – students behave as proto-professionals;
- **Pervasive:** extends beyond examinations, is supported by family, carers, and peers, and can be extended through independent (and interdependent) informal learning;
- **Principled:** appeals to the student’s passions or moral purpose – it matters to students.

Whilst this framework is still a work-in-progress, we are hopeful that it not only leads us to a richer, and more sophisticated understanding of engagement, but that it will help guide the design of learning (or, as in an increasing number of cases, the co-design of learning with students).

*“If you’re not given the opportunity to do something, you kind of feel that there’s no point, because it wasn’t your choice... If you’re not given a say, then you kind of feel invalid... I think that a lot of students would feel that kind of breaks their confidence as well.”*

LEARNING FUTURES STUDENT INTERVIEWEE



## WHO TO ENGAGE?

Changing the mindset, from a student-centred responsibility for engagement to a shared commitment, has been a key challenge for all involved in the Learning Futures Programme.

Though, intuitively, practitioners recognise that a student’s depth of engagement may be directly influenced by the extent to which learning innovations in school seek connections with student’s peers, families, carers and local communities, building such a broad base is complex, time-intensive and often daunting.

Even though we sought proposals which opened schools out – physically, socially, technologically – projects initially tended to be tightly restricted in time, participants and location. Increasingly, however, many of the participating schools have been inspired by their peers to broaden the scope of their projects, for example by including parents within the learning community, recruiting peer leaders, or moving the locations for learning beyond the classroom and the school. For many, the risks have been significant. Some are putting

their high performing status at stake by radically shifting the responsibilities for, and roles within, a learning community. Others are under pressure to improve results, and ‘letting go’ (a commonly voiced phrase) of power and authority requires trust, vision and leadership in equal measure. However, they are extending their projects’ innovation and ambition, confident that outcomes for students will improve, and knowing that their families and communities will have a greater investment in learning.

*“So much of the innovation we are trialling requires a ‘letting go’: letting go of control, of learning, of our positions as experts and ultimately letting our students out of our classrooms. These are not easy things for us.”*

EXTRACT FROM BIDDENHAM INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL LEARNING FUTURES BLOG

### CASE STUDY

**The Harris Federation** of 9 Academies in South East London (frequently praised as some of the most improved schools in England) have established a Student Commission on Learning. Students have been creating knowledge on how to improve learning and the conditions necessary to bring about improvement. Evidence has been gathered from expert witnesses, students taking part in intensive ‘learnovers’ – discussing learning with other students internationally – and through regular consultation with the Federation’s Senior Leadership. The commission recently published its interim findings, featuring 12 key ideas around teaching, learning, content and partnership. The Federation’s Executive are committed to implementing the recommendations made once the enquiry is completed, in 2010.

## HOW TO ENGAGE?

Our first pamphlet identified the four domains which we felt were critical to next practice in Learning and Teaching; Relevance, Co-Construction, In/Out of school contexts & the Learner/Teacher Mix.

Having now begun to work with Learning Futures schools, we can identify 8 key learning themes, which are central to increasing engagement. Four of these focus on the practice of learning; the other four focus on creating a supportive operational environment for learning.

The practice-based themes have been the subject of a number of cross-programme workshops with Learning Futures Coordinators and Head Teachers, and will be explored in detail in subsequent publications. The remaining four will be a focus for investigation in the second phase of the project.

Practice	Environment
Enquiry & Project Based Learning	Leadership and Workforce Development
Expanding the Locations for, and Partners in, Learning	Structure and Resources
Co-constructing Learning	Creating the conditions for Independence (and Interdependence) of Learning
Mentoring and Coaching	Evolving a shared Language for Learning



*“The focus on developing students as independent learners means you have to relinquish some control of the learning and give the tools of learning to students to use themselves and trust that it will happen, which is quite difficult for teachers to do.”*

LEARNING FUTURES SCHOOL COORDINATOR

### BLENDING PEDAGOGIES

It's important to stress that none of the participants in the Learning Futures programme are constructing teaching and learning strategies exclusively based upon these key learning themes. Rather, their innovations are being blended with more traditional forms of teaching and learning. Whilst enquiry and project-based learning may enthuse students, acquiring 21st century skills cannot be divorced from the need for discipline-specific knowledge. Co-construction may provide students with a greater sense of ownership of their learning, but such ownership counts for little if students feel unprepared when facing examinations.

There will, therefore, always be a need for the integration of more conventional didactic methods. Engaging learners demands that skilled practitioners blend pedagogical approaches, using the most efficient and appropriate methods according to the needs of students.

That said, it is the case that ways to impart necessary information to students have changed relatively little since the inception of schooling – copying from a book/board and listening to the teacher talk ‘for a long time’ remain the two most commonly observed pedagogies in secondary schools<sup>6</sup>. In an attempt to find more engaging ways of acquiring subject-specific knowledge, one of our Learning Futures partners, Monkseaton High School, is pioneering an approach called Spaced Learning. This approach is demonstrating remarkable results by drawing on recent neuro-scientific research, which informs the design of intensive, knowledge transmission techniques.

### CASE STUDY

Teachers at **Monkseaton High School** have been piloting a new memory acquisition technique called ‘Spaced Learning’. In studies, Spaced Learning has been shown to effectively enable young people to acquire large amounts of required information in short periods of time, allowing more time to be freed up for other teaching and learning strategies, such as independent learning and co operative learning. The technique involves short periods (around 10 –12 minutes) of intensive presentations, which are then repeated twice , with variations, within a conventional 50 minute lesson. These presentations are ‘spaced’ with short periods of activities unconnected to the learning topics.

Since joining the Learning Futures project, Monkseaton have become increasingly interested in the enquiry/project based learning element of many schools projects. They are about to start a trial of enquiry based learning, incorporating Spaced Learning within it.

Monkseaton are also creating a resource pack (which will be available for free through Learning Futures) so that Spaced Learning approaches can be adopted, adapted, and appraised by other practitioners.

## ENGAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

So far, we have examined some of the complexities involved in defining student engagement, and suggested a more holistic approach to providing opportunities for it to happen. We have argued that, in order to go from ‘compliance’ to ‘commitment’, the responsibility for engagement needs to extend far beyond the student: family, friends, local communities and businesses can all play a critical role in deepening the relevance and authenticity of learning.

Reaching out, beyond the confines of the classroom, provides exciting opportunities as well as many challenges. Our Learning Futures students and staff are already noting the tension between what might be termed conventional, didactic teaching and learning which is built around projects or enquiry, and coached rather than taught – especially when both students and teachers are moving between these worlds several times a week. Despite these constraints, and many teething problems, all our 15 sites are, in the words of one coordinator, ‘holding their nerve’, and continuing with their

innovations. The reward of seeing students highly motivated, and becoming more independent in their learning, appears to make the disruption, and additional work involved, worthwhile.

The remaining sections address the question of how deeply engaging learning can be realised; the conditions needed, the signs that it is happening, and the implications for assessment. These key elements are illustrated through further examples of Learning Futures innovations, this time seen through the lens of the ‘four Ps’, introduced earlier.

### CASE STUDY

**Harlington Area Trust** has designed a set of new projects based around work-related challenges which enable years 3, 7 and 9 to learn new skills together, and the development of an assessment process for learners, peers and staff that enables the development of new sets of skills.

In December 2009, the Trust showcased the project work of 800 students in Years 3, 7 and 9, from five schools within the Trust. Students co-constructed work around a series of campaigns on issues which were principled (e.g. whale conservation, young people’s body image, overpaid footballers), placed (many campaigns had local roots) and purposeful (the campaigns were ‘real’, and were critiqued by local business representatives). Students peer assessed each other’s work and there was strong involvement from parents and the local community.

*“I think the best bit is seeing how motivated the students have been, doing something they take responsibility for and that they really want to do. I thought they would be more resistant, more insecure and look for me to tell them what they needed to do, but there’s been very little of that.”*

LEARNING FUTURES TEACHER

### PEDAGOGIC CONDITIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Learning Futures consultants and the evaluation team will be identifying the organisational and environmental conditions for increasing engagement, described earlier. These will be disseminated through a future pamphlet. At this point, we are concerned with the pedagogical conditions which foster deep engagement.

Of prime importance, perhaps, is the inescapable requisite of a productive, mutually respectful *relationship between learner and significant adult*

(the term teacher is incomplete in a context where mentors, community experts or project commissioners may also have a close relationship with the student). In interviews with students, there is a strong correlation between enjoyment of learning and strong adult relationships. Being ‘known’ by a teacher – no mean feat in a high school of over 1500 students – has a clear impact on student attitudes to learning. Students identified qualities such as trust, affirmation and challenge as key aspects in building their engagement and commitment.

### CASE STUDY

**Linton Village College** have begun ‘Language Futures’ (one of 12 distinct Learning Futures projects being trialled within LVC). 17 students of all abilities are studying their preferred choice of language, rather than those traditionally on offer. This year’s cohort has opted for Spanish, Latin American Spanish, Italian, German, Portuguese and Mandarin.

The programme is not designed to ‘teach’ a language, but to equip the students to be autonomous and informed language learners – to create a community of language learners supported by a school, home and the wider community. LVC have forged a partnership with on-line language company, Rosetta Stone, and Anglia Ruskin University, which has a number of foreign students who are learning English and is sourcing native

speaking mentors for all students. International e-mentors and Skype partners will begin soon. Students’ placed their language choices within familial connections and the learning will be pervasive through online learning, family support and mentoring.

A member of staff commented: “It is so powerful how independently they work; how they constructively problem-solve and learn on behalf of one another. We are already at the stage where we can co-construct topics and we will soon have community mentors – and, after that, international e-mentors through the British Council’s e-twinning programme. Seeing them in the classroom organising their own learning is amazing. There is total engagement. There are no behaviour issues”.

## ENGAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

Whilst project-based learning and activities which go beyond school can be liberating for staff and students, it is important that activities incorporate a sense of *boundaried freedom* – that students are given a clear set of guidelines, procedures or protocols within which they can make choices. As one Year 9 student put it: “I’d like to have a little bit more of a say, but... I think you need the teacher there to sort of guide you”.

Learning Futures students are highly vocal about the importance of hands-on, active learning. At the heart of such experiences is the promotion of *practical, scaffolded enquiry*. Here the concept of ‘reverse engineering’ can be helpful. By starting at the end – with what students would need to have done, or what knowledge they would need to have acquired – a series of learning challenges can be designed, within which students can be free to explore and learn from their mistakes.

The fourth condition becoming apparent is a *flexible repertoire of classroom strategies and ‘ways of being’*, which include coaching and mentoring, coupled with a shared commitment to *teachers as collaborative learners*. Many schools, ironically, tend not to be effective learning communities, not least because of embedded structural conditions – the privacy of the classroom, the segregation of subject departments – and external pressures and workload demands. Consequently, innovative practice often stays locked within a single teacher or department. As one teacher described it :

“The innovation side of things is a particular kind of passion at the moment with me...and I think the vast majority of the time we’re getting some really nice kind of different ways of teaching and new ideas coming up. And that’s very beneficial, not only for the kids but for our teaching styles, the way we do things.”

Or another:

“We have a meeting every month...originally I think it was called the good ideas group. And that’s where we spread our ideas – with a plan that those few key people can then go back to their given departments... and say ‘so and so had a very good idea here –let’s try it.”

### RECOGNISING DEEP ENGAGEMENT

Indicators of engagement are much discussed, and rarely agreed upon. Is a student, seen gazing out of the window, bored, or grappling with a creative conundrum? Was the student who handed work in, correctly, and on-time, enthused about the task, or ‘getting it out of the way’?

We anticipate that our attempt to identify signs of the deeper engagement for which we have argued, might be contestable. Nevertheless, if we are advocating pedagogies which motivate and inspire, we have a responsibility to describe their impact. Quantitatively, we are testing an engagement survey tool, comprising two existing instruments<sup>7</sup> and a Learning Futures scale which accommodates diverse locations and partners in learning. At this point we have ‘pre-intervention’ data, but will only be able to conduct a

“It’s really weird. I was fine just coming to school, learning and then going home, but now I want to learn a lot more – get into what goes on with things. The project showed me that it could be fun to learn.”

LEARNING FUTURES STUDENT

### CASE STUDY

Noadswood School is introducing subject-based peer mentoring in Science and History. They use The University of Bristol’s Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory as a diagnostic tool, which then provides a stimulus for conversations about learning. Mentors are students from years 10 and 11, along with some ex-students who are paid to work with the mentees.

Over 40 students turned up to the first peer mentoring session in Science and both mentors and mentees were very positive about the experience. Mentees said:

“the mentors explain things in a way that you can really understand and they know what it’s like to be in your position”

“the sessions are really relaxed and you don’t feel under pressure”

“I like how you can meet up with the mentors anytime to ask them about things”.

The mentoring programme will now be expanded, and is supported by a Parents’ Focus Group which meets every six weeks. The purpose of the group is to secure greater

parental support for students, through developing parents coaching skills and a shared language of learning. The face to face meetings are supported by an online portal and regular email alerts on student achievement.

Noadswood’s mentoring initiative is purposeful, in seeking to improve greater commitment to, and achievement in, learning; it is expanding the location and partners in learning by being pervasive within the school and home.





PHOTO: EMILIE HOLBA

'post-intervention' analysis after a minimum of a full academic year. Qualitatively, through interview and observation, the emerging picture is clearer. We are witnessing striking examples and articulations of highly committed and engaged learners, who usually display some of the following characteristics:

Students are absorbed in their activity: anyone witnessing a young person playing, say, on-line role playing games will know what this looks like. It is rare, however, to see such depth of absorption in school-based work. Researchers from the University of Western Sydney have described the difference as being 'in-task', not just 'on-task'.<sup>8</sup> Other indicators of high absorption would be students wishing to continue beyond the end of lesson, or not even noticing the lesson had ended – what Csikszentmihalyi has described as being in 'Flow'.<sup>9</sup>

Students display persistence, even in difficulty: a deeply engaged student becomes confident in their own ability to succeed, through persistence. As one Learning Futures student put it:

"you've got to figure it out for yourself 'cos if people just told you, you'd just find it an easy life, but life is full of obstacles and stuff, and you've got to work through them yourself and make your own mistakes"

Student's learning 'leaks' out of school: a student may frequently choose to continue with their task or project beyond school – in their homes, either with friends, or alone.

Students are able to positively 'connect' their learning : deeply engaged students often display

*"Learning Futures was about how we could be creative in our Key Stage 3 curriculum. We're looking at capturing learning. It's not about a tick-box exercise and it's not about assessing it in traditional forms."*

LEARNING FUTURES COORDINATOR

'expert' characteristics – especially if they are engaged in project or enquiry learning. They begin to think and act, like scientists, or engineers, and can independently 'join up' learning from one context to another. In the words of another interviewee: 'I make links between everything, so I can tell a story, or relate it to something that happened, and that's how I really learn'. This adaptive competence, the ability to construct and contextualise their own learning, is in sharp contrast to the 'bite-size' knowledge acquisition, that typifies much of current conventional pedagogy.

The frustration, now being expressed by students and staff, is that few of these characteristics are either assessed or valued by a test-score dominated system, despite being highly sought after by both employers and higher education.

#### ASSESSING FOR ENGAGEMENT

The recognition of assessment as an integral part of the learning process demands that we challenge conventional models of assessment that neither assess engagement nor engage students in the assessment process – and many do neither.

The innovations created by our Learning Futures schools attempt to foster motivational, authentic and deep learning, so naturally favour project and enquiry-based learning or applied learning situations. Teachers describe the tension in trying to apply school-bound, teacher-led, grade-dominated assessment regimes to experiences which are invariably more integrative, outward facing and which have their own intrinsic motivation and values.

#### CASE STUDY

At Cramlington Learning Village in Northumberland, Year 8 & 9 students undertake a trans-disciplinary, enquiry-based learning programme. Some projects are structured for students, whilst others are co-constructed with students.

The programme is purposeful in developing the skills (Communication, Collaboration, Thinking) and attributes (Resilience, Resourcefulness, Reasoning, Responsibility, Reflection) of great learners. Additionally, a 'so what?' aspect of each project requires students to use their learning to make a positive difference, thus ensuring their proposals are principled and placed within their local community. A feature of each project is that students communicate with 'experts' in the community and present their learning to an audience at the end of each project.

The introductory 'information fluency' module prepares students to research information from a variety of sources, assessing source integrity. Students also ensure that the learning will be pervasive by setting up blogs and forums, and by collaborating with students and experts in the UK and around the world.

**ENGAGEMENT IN PRACTICE**

Our challenge, therefore, lies in applying the same matrix of placed, purposeful, pervasive and principled learning throughout the assessment process. If student work engages local communities and businesses, then it follows that assessors should also be drawn from those groups. If we seek more independence and interdependence (through collaborative projects), then more self and peer assessment should follow, both summatively and formatively. If we seek to make learning more pervasive, through, for example, internet and media technologies, then video diaries uploaded onto YouTube should be as valid as written journals.

The use of public presentations or exhibitions at the conclusion of student work is already proving popular. One of our peer organisations – High Tech High Schools in San Diego County – feature public presentations in most student projects. These events not only provide an authentic and motivational spur for students to self-assess, they also promote social and community cohesion, attracting large audiences of family, community and business members.

*“The most important thing about the Learning Futures project has been realising that there’s a lot of different ways to learn and seeing how adventurous you can be with learning and that you can do something out of the ordinary from everyone else. And as I’ve gone on I think my work’s got better because I’ve got a variety of different ways of presenting it. So I think I’ve got better as a learner.”*

LEARNING FUTURES STUDENT



# CONCLUSION

Identifying what we mean by engaging learning has been a critical first step in the development of the Learning Futures programme. It provides a common platform upon which to build changes to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in our participating schools.

For too long, those who develop educational policies have viewed learner engagement as an added bonus – only considered after compliance and achievement are in place. It's our contention, however, that those who are considered disruptive or failing – or indeed those who have achieved passively – have, more often than not, simply disengaged from the process they are being put through. Throughout this programme we have seen many students who appear to 'come back to life' once the learning activities presented to them reflect their passions, principles and often hidden abilities. We're already witnessing improvements in behaviour and performance across many of our partner schools.

The next steps are to honestly evaluate what appears to work, and is sustainable and scaleable. We have asked our partners to document their students' thoughts, feelings and experiences<sup>1</sup> and our evaluation team will provide an objective lens through which to observe such changes. After sites are confident in their innovations, they will be working with us to ensure that documented materials and approaches will be shaped into tools which other schools and practitioners will find useful.

It is, of course, early days in discovering what aspects of the Learning Futures innovations are likely to trigger the transformation of student's attitudes to learning and schooling.

Within Learning Futures, we are still trying to discover what practices are likely to trigger a transformation of students' attitudes toward learning and schooling. But already we know one thing: that having students engaged and excited about their learning is far too important to be considered a mere happy accident of schooling, and far too central to be ignored in our assessment of teaching, learning, and schools.

*“What we're getting now is a culture of engagement, of involvement, of opportunity, and that's something that we've not had before.”*

LEARNING FUTURES COORDINATOR

<sup>1</sup> These will be regularly updated through the partner schools' blogs, alongside student's reflections, at [www.learningfutures.org](http://www.learningfutures.org)

## REFERENCES

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## FOOTNOTES

PAGE 5

<sup>1</sup> Ipsos MORI Survey of Secondary School Pupils, 2007

<sup>2</sup> 'The Schools Our Children Deserve' Kohn, A.

PAGE 6

<sup>3</sup> 'A Stitch In Time: Tackling Educational Disengagement' Sodha, S, Gugliemi, S. Demos

PAGE 9

<sup>4</sup> 'What Did You Do In School Today?' CEA [www.cea-ace.ca/res.cfm?subsection=wdy](http://www.cea-ace.ca/res.cfm?subsection=wdy)

<sup>5</sup> 'A Stitch In Time: Tackling Educational Disengagement' Sodha, S, Gugliemi, S. Demos

PAGE 13

<sup>6</sup> Ipsos MORI Survey of Secondary School Pupils, 2007

PAGE 16

<sup>7</sup> Vital Partnership's Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI), and the New Zealand Council for Educational Research's 'Me and My School' survey

PAGE 18

<sup>8</sup> 'Schools is For Me: Pathways to Student Engagement' , (2006) The Fair Go Project, University of Western Sydney

<sup>9</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1990). 'Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.' New York: Harper and Row.



‘Engaging Students’ confronts the biggest challenge facing schools today: how to keep young minds enthused about, and engaged in, the business of learning. Educators are under pressure to stem the rising tide of disengaged and often disheartened, learners who increasingly see schooling as something inflicted upon them. The Learning Futures programme is committed to finding new ways to build learning around students needs, interests and passions, while still achieving positive outcomes. This pamphlet presents some of the emerging findings on what we mean by engagement, and how we might achieve it in all schools.

