Ministerial Conference

"Opening up education through technologies:
Towards a more systemic use for a smart, social and sustainable growth in Europe"

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Parallel Session 1: Opening up Learning and Teaching

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Introduction

Learning and teaching should be based upon learner centred approaches. Opening up learning and teaching will allow the individual to decide on a personalised way of learning and blend different forms and places where his/her learning takes place (at school, at home, in the community, at work, for leisure, etc.). Schools and universities need to adapt to these new challenges and become dynamic creative and innovative learning environments. This transformation will only be possible if pedagogical and assessment approaches fully take on board the possibilities offered by modern technologies. Professional development of teachers, as well as the role of both teachers and learners will be reshaped.

We live in a new Learning Age. Our TV shows across Europe are filled with celebrities learning to dance, to cook, to sing and more. Our Olympians at their moments of triumph are no longer blandly asked "how do you feel", but are interrogated about the work, the processes, the application and the insights that have brought them success. And television itself, which in the last century saw whole families sitting passively viewing, is being pushed aside by the interactivity of new portable and pocketable screens on tablets and phones. People are doing where they were formerly watching. Every corporate entity in our European cities aspires to being a "learning organisation", where before they knew only of Training. This is the best possible time for Learning, but not necessarily for Education which has struggled to keep up in a host of ways.

At the same time emergent economies and regions have the opportunity to leap over the expense and long history of our European legacy systems and to redesign learning and teaching from the ground up. They are making remarkable progress. Just as, globally, relatively few nations or regions now specialise in car production, or moviemaking so we will find, as Learning goes global, that a just few regions will lead, whilst most of the world follows. At this point, you wouldn't bet on Europe to be a leader of learning. The question for Europe is whether we can open up learning and teaching enough, and with enough speed, to lead the world in Learning, or whether we will be happy to become mass consumers of others' curricula, of others' educational provision and of others learning.

In every sense, this is a race for the hearts & minds, and culture, of Europe.

Discussion

The pace of change of technology, and the impact it has on our expectations, and indeed entitlements, has rendered the mechanisms we had for managing educational change largely invalid. Faced with an exponential rate of change our old model of piloting, reflecting, running through some iterative cycles and

then legislating for perhaps a 5 or 10 year plan is hopelessly slow. Similarly, our scholarly reflection through careful peer review and eventual publication doesn't begin to keep up with the observed change we see all around us. Schools are running ahead of policy and the literature, within them innovate teachers, old and young, are running ahead of their schools and in some enlightened, indeed exhilarating, cases, the students are running ahead of even the innovative teachers. The model has inverted; co-construction of better learning is happening all around us, student led innovation, teachers' peer to peer exchanges of effective practice is happening from the ground up. This is not quite a pedagogic Arab Spring, but is does feel like substantial and substantive change from below.

If change isn't going to be led from policy, at the pace required, then in this rapidly evolving world of learning we are effectively left with two assets in making judgements about the direction, implication and desirability of change: trust and community. That has effectively, and excitingly, been an already proven model of change and has opened up teaching and learning, demonstrably. In schools around the world passionately committed young teachers are assembling in trusted communities to swap and validate each other's tested ideas about what effective learning can be like. For example the TeachMeets (just Google the term), which are loosely structured informal meetings in the style of an unconference, find teachers sharing good practice, practical innovations and evidence in a way that is agile, playful, and hugely effective. One evening a week on Twitter in Australia, the UK and elsewhere groups of teachers managed and mediated by a rotating chairperson, debate the topic of the week which is itself set by an online discussion and vote. Debates are then archived from back reference with the curatorial role being taken by classroom practitioners rather than university researchers. #ukedchat is but one example to explore.

A common misconception seems to be that teachers' professional development is a substantial cost, yet these many evidenced examples of teachers leading and validating their own innovation, occur effectively for no star or central cost at all. The UK's New Opportunities Fund's (NOF) 2004-6 spent £230 million programme on the professional development of teachers ICT competencies and was significantly less effective making change happen than the host of free TeachMeets running almost weekly somewhere in the country today. Increasingly those events include Skyped contributions from around the world too. It turns out perhaps unsurprisingly that seducing teachers is more effective than inducing them.

And finally, it is not possible to talk of opening up learning and teaching through technologies, without a focus on the learners' voice. This does not mean setting up Schools' Councils, or focus groups, it means the wholesale engagement of every learner in the quest to make learning better.: schools are utilising pupil observation of lessons, with direct feedback to teachers about what was, and wasn't effective; children are filming scrapbooks of their best learning moments using mobile phones during lesson time, students are breaking out of the traditional timetable into day, and even week long immersion learning; children are even in a few cases organising a full inspection of the school, using state inspection criteria. Why are students suddenly so central to opening up learning and teaching? There are three reasons: firstly they see things that we doesn't see, fresh eyes, a fresh perspective helps when pace matters. Secondly, the act of asking them leads directly to their own meta-reflection, which produces reflective learners who are themselves more effective and finally because they too are in networks of learners elsewhere they bring entirely fresh ideas from other schools, other nations, other learning contexts. The mantra is simply that in this millennium we can't build better learning for children, but we certainly can build better learning with them.

Questions for discussion

1. As teaching and learning have opened up to the co-construction by students and the peer to peer exchange of innovative teachers, how does policy keep up, and how might policy take best advantage of this remarkable but uneven progress?
2. What are the substantial policy barriers to opening up learning and teaching?
3. How can we close the now vast disconnect between our university faculties of education and the vibrant new learning that has already emerged in our leading third millennium classrooms and elsewhere?
4. If the recession economy has produced a generation characterised by disengagement and in many cases unemployment, then how might we revisit teaching and learning to make them seductive and engaging enough to save a lost generation?

References

It would seem pointless to talk of opening up teaching and learning and then appending a traditional reading list of referenced papers, so for this parallel session the references are multifaceted, graphs, video, Twitter groups and more. Do please explore these links, you will enjoy, and learn from them.

All the links for this session can be found from http://www.heppell.net/ministerial