
Developing the expert learner

Extracts from an interview with Professor Stephen Heppell

“Well, in my world everybody is a learner, everybody on the planet, so we’ve got a subset of the planet here this morning. People who care about learning and we’ve got some interesting challenges for them really. We’ve got a provocative little task that involves them telling a story with pictures, which is a really hard thing to do with still pictures and we’re going to unpack that. However, first we’re going to cue that up in the context of 21st century learning; we’re in a very different world at the moment.”

“I’m a bit scared of the ‘expert’ word because, I think the hierarchy and expertise that we build frightens people off a bit. I think we spend nothing like enough time on the expertise of learning. We know that when we listen to the learners’ voice they say incredibly wise and sensible things about the learning process. However, we also know that the act of reflecting on their learning, that meta-level reflection, is a magic propellant that just throws them forward in extraordinary ways. I mean, why we don’t do more of that I can’t begin to imagine.”

“Personalisation for me isn’t individualisation; I think there’s a huge confusion. Personalisation works for villages and families and institutions too. It’s a really interesting time and, just to dwell on that for a moment, the overlap between communities then Venn diagram the different places where you might learn is absolutely a dynamic space. To some extent public education and public service has not camped out in those overlapping spaces. It jolly well needs to.”

“I think the government, historically, has confused standards with standardisation. We’re all ambitious for standards but the one thing we’re certain about is we don’t get there by standardising.”

“It’s very rare I think for the people who are in charge of learning to have the same freedoms that we’re embracing for our learners. I spoke yesterday at the Department of Education in really quite a radical discussion and debate. You started to think, crikey it’s starting to happen; learning is sweeping through the administrative stretches as well. That’s what I mean by everybody is a learner. We’ve just got to get the ministers learning as well and then we’re really well away.”

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“There's a question about disengagement that we should come to. Part of the disengagement is because people are imposing inappropriate models on our learners and literacy is one of them. There's a lot of angst at the moment about downloading free essays from Google. One response is, the essay proves that children have learnt their stuff and if they can download them free. It seems to me that a 21st century task might be: go to Google, get four essays, pick one, improve it significantly, then hand in the improvement and show your workings. Then pick another one with your friends and critique it. I mean really go after it; look at its sources, look at its prejudices and look at its inability to answer the question - critique it. It seems to me the ability to judge, select and critique is absolutely essential 21st century tasks.”

“It's worth just reflecting how important narrative is in all this, also that meta-narrative. A lot of peoples' experience of anything is narrated afterwards. Indeed our experience of learning, our learning journey, is narrated as a series of milestones and key moments of self-revelation. We miss out that narrative at our peril, but the narrative isn't necessarily about linear notation. We can build narrative in lots of ways. You listen to any four people you know at a bar and they're offering narratives on their week, their life, their marriage, whatever. There are a whole lot of strategies that we can use, but learning for me has a key element of narrative running right through it.”

“20th century learners needed to be compliant, punctual, uniform and pretty dull really. 21st century learners really need to be ambitious. They need to be collaborative. More than collaborative really, they need to embrace the idea of mutuality. They need to really not just work with others, but need to work with others and sometimes on their own. Above all else, I think they need to stand back and have their eyes on a horizon and it's a global horizon, it absolutely is.”

“I think we've got to open our hearts, minds and our systems to new learning and that means everything. It's a trivial thing but it's worth remembering that kids have stopped emailing; email is what your dad does and it's rather a sad thing. Yet we're still saying here's the curriculum, we expect you to be able to format text and word process a document. I mean that's gone. How can we be agile enough to keep up with the new technologies? This is a key question, I think, particularly for colleges. We're not agile enough, people will come to the door, see the rules and just deflect them and go somewhere else. They'll have choices; they'll have a lot more choices.”