

Genuine all-through learning: The path to knowledge

by Dave Harris, Author and Education Consultant



How often do you walk through your school observing the learning from the youngest to the oldest? (If your school has more than one Key Stage, include them all; children's development is blind to such labels.) Does the following description sound familiar?

As we walk into the infants' room we are struck by the sense of fun and excitement. The walls drip with colour and learning prompts. The children are excited to be here and the teacher seems completely happy in the centre of learning. The children are engaged on different activities and are even helping each other improve their work. There is clarity about the roles of everyone in their group and the children are demonstrably enjoying the learning, often working independently in different areas of the room.

As you walk through the school, advancing through the years, there is a clear change. The children are becoming less mobile, less excited and more placid. The teacher is moving from a 'facilitator' role to one of the 'giver of knowledge'; the learning in the room seems to all originate from the adult. The walls are more functional and, at the older end, contain a few rather faded commercial posters. The energy in

the room seems to reduce and the pupils no longer seem to be as engaged, often sitting in rows with their eyes fixed on the front. The pupils wait to be led through their next bit of the curriculum.

Sadly, the description above is all too familiar. On one occasion after an experience similar to this I asked the Headteacher what she felt the core purpose of her school was. She replied without hesitation: "to produce motivated, enthusiastic, independent learners". I gently pointed out to her that this was what the school was starting with and then systematically removing from her pupils.

Why does this happen? Surely there must be a reason why so many schools are developing this journey?

Does the brain require this change as pupils get older?

Of course the brain develops on the journey from baby to adult, and requires different approaches to maximise learning as it does. However, the changes are gradual (and certainly don't happen at a common age for all). Even the brain of an adult responds positively to the learning environment

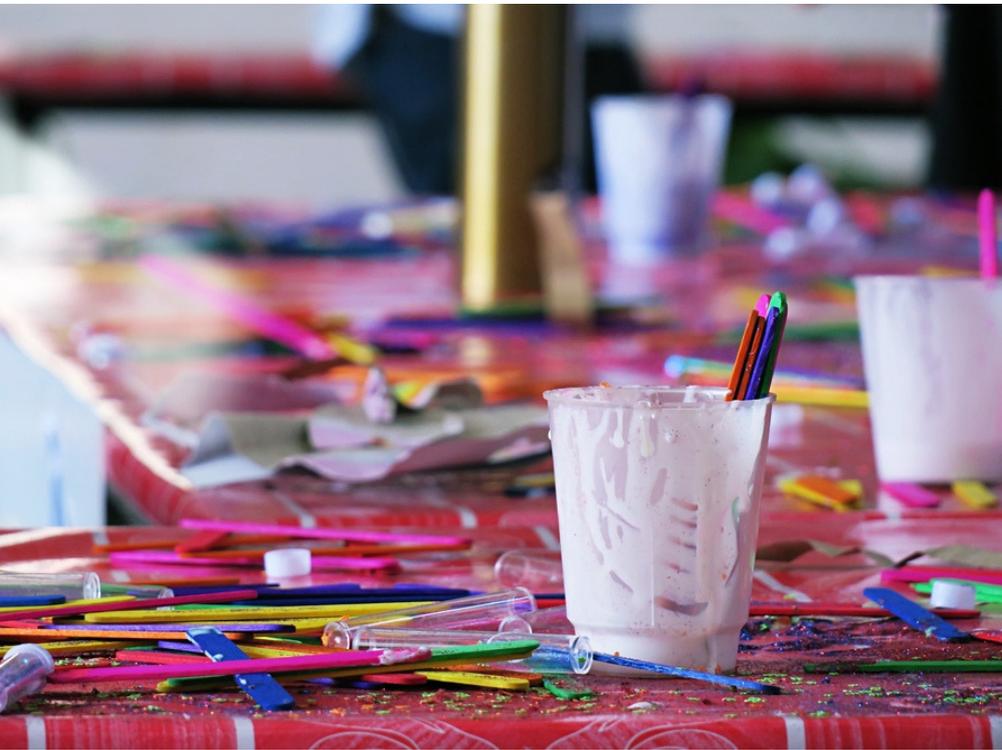
traditionally supplied for an infant (how many of us would say we learn best when we are sitting in rows being talked at?)

Do universities require this type of change?

Certainly not! The most common moan from University departments is that they wish schools would provide them with more independent and more motivated learners. The number of hours of formal lectures are dropping, being supplemented by a bank of on-line learning resources, all of which require the student's motivation and dedication.

Does the world of work require this change?

Again, no! Repeated reports from employers talk about the need to provide school leavers with skills such as resilience, self-motivation, ingenuity and independence. In an increasingly complex world businesses are having to reimagine the way they work and therefore are not looking for their employees to work in the way they have always done.



If schools can produce young people able to use the information at their fingertips the world has a great future. I have seen some wonderful leaders who are transforming their schools and the learning that happens within them. If you want help on your journey please let us know at Independent Thinking – “Do things no one does, or do things everyone does in a way no one does!” •

Does the brain require this change as pupils get older?

Toward the end of the 17th century in England there was a period of great unrest and unhappiness as citizens had to adapt to new ways of living and working. As the world shifted from an agricultural model to an industrial one people needed to change habits and behaviours that had been passed down from generation to generation. The resultant instability and unhappiness caused knock on effects for over 50 years until a new ‘norm’ was achieved. We are now in the middle of an equally dramatic shift into a post-industrial society (sometimes referred to as the Information Society).

It is a natural human response to feel concern about this change (even without the advent of new global threats). When we feel unsettled we will want to hang onto old ways of doing things, like clinging onto a tree in a fast running river; we hope the turbulence around us will settle and allow us to continue our lives in the old ways. This is understandable, but wrong.

It is very questionable if traditional ‘chalk and talk’ methods were ever the best way of supporting genuine learning, but there is little doubt they are not what we need now.

What we need are young people leaving school with a passion for learning, with a realisation of the immense possibilities that the world holds for them.

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Leadership Dialogues II (Leadership in times of change) published autumn 2017

About



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