

# Students Designing Their Learning?

By Gareth Long

It always amazes me that so many people are surprised when they talk to and actually listen to students talking about their approaches to learning. But how often does this happen? Many adults say they talk to students, teachers teach them and talk to them, but they frequently don't really listen to them or really get to understand each person's individual approach to learning. Education is too often done to groups in exactly the same way, the learning experience shaped by the adult, regardless of student skills or aptitudes. This is often called the factory or industrial approach to learning. There is no evidence that "one size fits all" brings about effective change to students. Listening to them instead would help influence the way of working, the use of technology and the spaces that they learn in.

Student & teacher groups participate in focus group events, talking to peers about strategies for learning, but often it is a "one off" disconnected event. This results in some students not fully comprehending what is trying to be achieved, raising issues that may not have been considered before. Their questions relating to how, where and when they learn best can produce responses that are superficial. If no one has asked them before, most responses will relate to direct everyday experience rather than reflecting on personal preferences. The absolute certainty they know is that they go to school each day and usually prefer some lessons to others. Frequently, they never ask themselves why this is or consider their role in making it better. They usually blame the teacher. This "one off" approach cannot be right. If they have never thought about this topic they would probably prefer time to think, discuss, reflect and develop their response.

There are other groups of schools and staff that don't want students to think about their learning. They prefer that students simply arrive and be receptors of knowledge. This works on the principal of *it worked for me x generations ago, we know the best way to impart knowledge and we've always done it this way no matter what changes in society have taken place*. Their view may have had some validity until recently. What really is different from a decade or longer ago, is the massive and increasingly rapid advance in technology.

Doing the same thing in the same way to a group of people of the same age at the same time, in the same room, and expecting the same result is not based in reality in today's society. The whole approach needs rethinking – but few are brave enough to start the conversation.

Education today is not just about "learning knowledge" – knowledge is instantly accessible, anywhere simply at the click of a mouse button. Learning now has to be much more about developing a range of skills for life and work, thinking creatively, learning where to access knowledge, verify it and apply it to the particular tasks. Admittedly there is balance to be struck – I am not advocating zero teaching of knowledge.

As part of my work I talk a lot to students. Many have never begun to think how they learn most effectively. Getting them to really think, understand and discuss how they learn as an individual happens over time. When they get it, they really demonstrate insight, perception and awareness.

Young people understand they learn in different ways for alternate types of work, they know they learn differently from their friends and they know they like working in different environments. Even talking in a group about how they work most effectively on a difficult project at home produces a myriad of answers such as: *Sitting at a table; in my room alone lying on the bed; on the sofa with people around me; with music; with my friends; totally*

*alone in absolute silence; with the television on; working while online so I can talk about it with my friend; and outside or in the library because there is nowhere to work inside.*

Many agree that they work in different ways on work that requires complex thought rather than one they consider really easy or don't value. Explore it further, and they demonstrate real awareness of the environment they want to work in for particular pieces of work.

Many students also prefer longer learning periods – they dislike moving every forty minutes or so simply because they have to, moving to another identical room next door for a totally different subject. "We just really get into our work and concentrate and we have to stop, move class and start something else – it's really annoying." They do have lots to say... if we listen.

All this is before we mention technology to support learning. Many students assume that the majority of their teachers are luddites or just plain technically illiterate. This may be true for some, but the picture is changing.

A simple truth is that students simply expect to use technology as part of their learning, as they expect to do when they enter higher education or the world of work. They are often frustrated when they are prevented from doing so – technology should not just be a home based learning activity. Student comments heard recently include: "We learn at school, despite the lack of technology, but we could learn so much more using it."

Mobile devices, including cell phones, are powerful, efficient, user-friendly and getting more so. Not utilizing them is a massive waste of a powerful resource. The wider concern and issue around cell phones in schools is a strategic one, but one that will have to be managed. Currently many schools are avoiding this issue. Cell phones will not be going away and massively increasing software means that almost anything can be done using them anytime, anywhere. Not using them in schools will make less and less sense. Students are very pragmatic. They know that there are times when using technology is not appropriate.

Students I speak to usually blame not using technology on staff that are afraid to use the technology, are afraid to admit that students can use it better than they can, or are afraid of it being misused.

What really infuriates students is that their teachers do not utilize the technology capacity available and make them perform tasks they feel are totally pointless. These tasks include recording assignment work or copying notes. Over five years ago, a panel of high school students spoke to over three hundred teachers and stressed this point. Back then the comment was "Why should we just have to copy down things from the board? Why don't you just blue tooth it to us?" Unfortunately, there was a total lack of comprehension by some of the assembled. Move that forward five years, then the message is even more compelling.

Students argue that technology is an important part of their education in preparing them for the world of work. Ask a student to list jobs where they will write with pen and paper as a job requirement – they quickly struggle after journalist and waiter. Former CEFPI keynote speaker Professor Stephen Heppell is frequently quoted as saying, "a switched off device is a switched off student."

So how does all this contribute to the design of learning spaces? We know that almost all their learning now occurs in a traditional classroom sitting on uncomfortable chairs or in rigid groups of round tables facing the front of the room. We realise that students understand that they:

- Work in a variety of uniquely different ways,
- Can select a range of different environments,
- Choose when to/when not to use technology.

Why on earth don't we let students help design the full range of agile learning environments that allows them to move and reconfigure spaces suited to the work at hand?

"Young people know and understand that more traditional group teaching in formal layouts is necessary at times, but these are moments and should not be the whole approach. If you create a system where initiative and creativity is valued and rewarded, then you'll get change from the bottom up," Paul Pastorek noted in "The Third Teacher".

The usual cries that "some students would fool around" or "do no work" do not really hold water. We shouldn't condemn all students, regardless of learning styles and aptitudes, to one set position for the sake of a few.

There is far more discussion about this in enlightened circles. We see learning environments started in all sorts of new venues – shopping malls, office spaces, church halls and so on. What is certain is that the majority of ideas behind these alternative spaces do not want to try and replicate the past, but rather consider the future and produce dynamic innovative environments that engage the learners and reflect their learning styles.

Surely all schools should be reflecting this thinking now if we are really going to get the best out of our young people. There is much work to do and many willing to continue the conversation. But until we actually do something different and not just talk about it, nothing will change.

**Gareth Long** is an internationally recognized independent education consultant with a wide range of experience including serving as a secondary school head teacher turning around several failing secondary schools. As senior advisor to the former Minister of Education, Cayman Islands, Gareth played a major role in the design of transformational new schools and received the Spirit of Excellence Award. Acting as education lead for one of the UK's biggest building contractors, Gareth provides education recommendations on the design of numerous new schools across the UK. The above article was part of a blogpost at <http://blog.garethl.com> 3rd January 2012.